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No. 453.

{ COMPLETE. }

FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER, 34 & 36 NORTH MOORE STREET, N. Y.
NEW YORK, August 1, 1891.

ISSUED EVERY SATURDAY.

{ PRICE
10 CENTS. }

Vol. 1

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FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER, 34 and 36 North Moore Street, New York. Box 2730.

JESSE JAMES' PLEDGE: OR, THE BANDIT KING'S LAST RIDE.

By D. W. STEVENS.



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JESSE JAMES' PLEDGE

OR,

The Bandit King's Last Ride.

By D. W. STEVENS,

Author of "Mysterious Ike; or, The Masked Unknown," "The Ford Boys' Vengeance," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN ON THE DARK HORSE.

"WALL, now yer talking, stranger."

"It's a good country."

"Er good country? Wall, I'd blush to remark. Why, Missouri air ther gawden spot o' the earth as shure ez yer a foot high."

"You live in Missouri?"

"Course I do. I wouldn't live no'ars else."

"Were you born here?"

"Course I war. I wouldn't be born no'ars else."

"I have no doubt that Missouri is an excellent State."

"Thar ain't none better, an' it would ge mighty hard with er feller ef he said thar war."

The speaker opened the door of the stage coach just wide enough to squirt a mouthful of tobacco juice out through the crack.

"Well, I would not say so," the fellow passenger who had been talking with the Missourian said. "I have heard the good qualities of Missouri praised before."

"Wall, I'd blush ter exclaim, stranger. It's ther best country on dirt."

"You grow large corn here."

"Grow large co'n? Wall, I'd blush ter exclaim. Stranger, co'n grows so big down in some o' these 'ere bottoms that yer hev ter build step ladders ter pull off the ears."

"The soil must be rich."

"Rich. Wall, I'd be full ter consider. Never saw ez rich sile in all my life. Why, pardner, yer mought plant er crow-bar nail in ther ground down hyar in ther bottom, an' it would sprout er ten-penny nail afore mornin'!"

"Is it possible?" cried the fellow passenger, looking incredulous, yet having a wholesome dread of the blustering Missourian, dared not deny his assertion.

"It's er fact," asserted the Missourian, again pulling the door partially open in order to expectorate tobacco juice outside the lumbering old stage.

"And the woods of Missouri," asked the eastern gent, who was conversing with the Missourian. "Is the country well timbered?"

"Timbered, wall now, sir, I'd blush ter consider, I'd do it fur er fact. I want ter tell yer

ther gospil trnth erbout the timber, mister, but ye'll say I'm er lyin'."

"No, I won't."

"Ye'll think it."

"Try me and see."

"I'll do it."

Again he squirted tobacco juice from the door.

"One night I war goin' home an' I heerd er tremengus crackin' an' snappin' an' smashin', an' I wondered wot it all meant. Then I looked erround an' I'm blessed ef it warnt ther moon er tryin' ter rise through ther tree tops, but they wnz too thick ter do it, and arter makin' half a dozen efforts ter rise up above ther tree tops it fell with er smash down on ther ground, an' I hed ter go home in ther dark."

Several of the passengers gazed at the speaker in amazement. But beyond a humorous twinkle in the eyes of the narrator which was concealed owing to the darkness there was nothing to evince his incredulity.

"I have no doubt but that the Missouri timber is excellent," the timid gentleman said.

"Wall, I'd falter ter remark. An' everything in Missouri is on ther gigantic scale, lem me tell yer."

"How are the minerals?"

"Yer mean iron, an' lead, an' gold?"

"Yes."

"Wall, now yer er groanin'. Why, sir, thar's iron enough in Missouri ter last ther world until Gabriel blows his trumpet, an' he may put off that ar job fur twenty million y'ars, too, ef he wants ter."

"And the lead?"

"Lead? Wall, sir, we've got lead springs in Missouri."

"Lead springs?"

"It's er fact, ur I'm a liar. Springs whar ther lead runs out melted, an' ther government's goin' ter hev men thar with big bullet molds ter ketch ther lead an' mold bullets fast ez it comes out, fur it comes melted."

"That's remarkable."

"Yas, this air er remarkable State."

"And a remarkable statement."

"Yer don't mean yer doubt it?"

"No, no, no!" cried the timid man. "I—I didn't say so."

"Wall, stranger, I'm natrally er good-natred feller, but I want yer ter understand right at onct thet I don't allow anyone ter doubt my statements."

"There is not the least lingering doubt about anything you have said."

"Thankee, I allers try ter be so plain that everybody kin understand me. I don't believe I ever deceive anybody."

"I should think not. But how are your stock?"

"Yer mean hogs?"

"Yes."

"Why, sir, hogs grow so fat, hyar they render up ther shadders fur soap grease."

"That's remarkable."

"I'd blush to consider; but it air er fact, ur I'm er liar."

"What do they get so fat on?"

"Pertaters."

"They grow potatoes to feed their hogs?"

"No."

"How do they get them?"

"Grow wild on the prairies. It air er fact, ur I'm er liar."

"I don't doubt it."

Then followed a silence broken only by the crunching of the Missourian's jaws, the rambling of the stage coach, or the opening of the door for the Missourian to squirt out tobacco juice.

"Have you fish here?" asked the timid man.

"Purliest yer ever saw," answered the Missourian. "It ud make any man sick at ther stomach ter say they warn't."

"Oh, I doubt not."

"Wall, I'd blush to remark."

"Where are the fish found?"

"On ther prairies."

This was too much for the incredulous passenger, and everybody roared with laughter.

The Missourian opened the door of the stage, and expectorating a large quantity of tobacco juice, added:

"'F tain't so I'm er liar!"

"There is no doubt of it," the timid man answered.

The timid man had not joined in the laugh.

"I berheve thar hain't more'n one half o' yer believe what I say," said the Missourian. "Wall,

of yer don't, all I got ter say erbout it iz it air so, ur I'm er liar."

"We'll not doubt that," said the timid man.

A young woman who had been listening to the conversation shuddered as she saw the fiery glance of the Missourian as he asked:

"D'yer mean ter say thar ain't no doubtin' my bein' er liar?"

"No, not exactly. I merely meant that if what you said was not true you was a liar."

"Simplest thing in ther world, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"That's so."

"But you have other trouble here."

"No, we don't," the Missourian answered.

"The James Boys."

"Wall, what uv them?"

"They are a trouble, are they uot?"

"No, not much."

"Don't they rob trains?"

"Yes."

"And banks?"

"Wall, I'd blush ter remark."

"That must annoy you."

"It don't."

"Don't?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I ain't got no money in ther banks ter worry me erbout."

"Of course not."

"How do ye know?"

"Because you said so, and you won't lie."

"Wall, I'd snicker ter kick."

"Hello, what's the matter now? The stage is stopping again."

The stage coach, which had been rolling leisurely along, began to slow up, and at last came to a complete stand still.

"What is it? What has happened?" cried an old woman who was half dead with fear.

"Don't you be skeered, grandma."

"You won't let them harm me—a poor old body like me?"

"Wall, I'd blush ter exclaim—"

At this moment all within the stage coach were startled by a voice from without ringing like a trumpet on the night air.

"Halt!"

There was no need to order a halt, for the driver had already reined in his horses.

"Up with your pins, pilgrim, or I shall be under the painful necessity of perforating your cranium with an ounce of lead."

"Wall, hold on, my hearty. I ain't goin' ter fight ye," cried the stage driver. "Do take away that air pistol. It mought be loaded, an' if it should go off it would injure me."

"Well, I want to assure you that a discharge from this pistol will not be conducive to good health," said the man with the revolver.

"Oh, dear, spare me."

There was a moment's silence, men came nearer mounted on horses, and the tramp of hoofs could be heard on every side.

The old woman began to scream and implore the robbers to have mercy on them.

A man riding up to the side of the stage door, rapped on the glass with the muzzle of his pistol and said:

"Hold your racket in there. We want to do a decent job here if you will let us."

"It's the old lady!" gasped the timid man.

"She is frightened almost to death."

The man who had been devoting his time to relating impossible stories and chewing tobacco, now glanced from the door, squirted a large quantity of tobacco juice and said:

"Now, folks, don't yer git rattled. This 'ere affair reminds me o' a leetle sarnstance wot once happened ter me while down on ther Canadian river—"

"Never mind that," cried a man, seizing the man by the shoulder. "Come, get out."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"Oh, well, I'll do it. Don't yer git mad at me, fur I'll do it ef yer say so."

He leaped out into the road, and expectorating more tobacco, said:

"I can't resist sich forcible argyment ez a cocked pistol. Them air leetle pints o' eteket wot people in Missouri allers respect."

"What have you got?" asked a man with a black mask over his face.

"I've got ther itch—d'yer want it?"

"No—money, yon rascal. Hand over your money."

"Wall, now, stranger, I would ef I had any, but I ain't got none."

"Search him, Jim, and see if he has any."

The fellow was searched from head to foot, but nothing of value was to be found upon his person.

"Who are you?" asked the horseman.

"Me?"

"Yes, stupid. What is your name?"

"Got several, stranger, which name d'yer want?"

"What name are you usually called by?"

"Tom Briggs, ther champion liar o' Clay County."

There was a slight snicker among the masked men at this assertion, and he who had been spokesman for the outlaws, answered:

"Well, I know something about Clay county and if you are all you claim, you are a wonder."

"I am, pilgrim. I tell yer jist wot's ther fact. I am ther boss pervericator o' America. Now yer mought ez well expect a river ter run straight ez fur me ter tell the truth. Why I never could tell ther truth. Et seems ez natural fur me ter lie ez it does ter eat. Nobody kin ever believe er word I say. My tongue is sich er stranger ter ther truth thet it becomes paralyzed whenever I make any attempt at it. But I allers own up. I tell people thet they needn't believe me fer if they do they'll git fooled every time."

"There you needn't go on any longer. Stand still and don't move a peg or we will take infinite delight in making a pepper box or a seive out of your body."

"Yas I've no doubt erbout it, friends, but I don't think I'd enjoy it myself."

"Keep silent."

"Silent, why great guns I swar I hain't sed er half er dozen words in six weeks."

They turned from the champion liar, whom they left in charge of a guard, and once more gave their attention to the other passengers.

"Come, old man, step out lively."

"I'm a comin', gentlemen."

"Be lively or we will have to send a bullet to hasten you."

"Oh, lor', don't do that."

"Then hurry."

"I'm comin'."

The old man stepped out on the ground and was ranged in a line with the others. His pocket-book and money were taken from him as well as his watch and diamond pin.

"Now, old man, the less grumbling you do, the better it will be for you. Next."

Next was an old woman.

"Oh, please don't harm me," she sobbed.

"Get out."

"Spare my money," she groaned.

She was made to stand up in the same row the others out was not molested.

"Is that all?" asked the man, who seemed leader of the masked men.

"Yes," said Briggs, the champion liar.

"Well, if his asservation in regard to himself is correct there is some one else in the stage," put in the chief.

"No, thar ain't."

"I will see."

The chief of the road agents produced a dark lantern and stepped up to the stage door.

Flashing the light on the door he glanced about for a moment and then seizing the door pulled it open.

He glanced in.

An exclamation of surprise escaped his lips. Before him he saw a veiled lady.

She was of a neat, graceful form and dressed in a becoming manner. There was something particularly attractive about her.

"Oho, so yon thought you would escape?" cried the highwayman.

"I have nothing to give you."

"Come, get out o' this."

"But I have no money."

"Get out."

"Nor jewels."

"Get out."

"Why?"

"Get out or I will have to drag you out."

She waited no longer for she dreaded the terrible masked men.

In a moment she leaped nimbly from the coach and was about to take her place among the other passengers, when there came the loud tramp of horses' feet and a few moments later a man mounted on a large dark horse galloped up.

Like the others there was a dark mask over his face concealing his features.

"Hold!" he cried.

The girl paused at the side of the coach and gazed at him in amazement.

"Don't go a step further, young woman."

"Why?"

"I am chief here and I forbid it."

Every man fell back as the chief advanced as if to acknowledge his authority.

"Answer some questions for me," said the man on the dark horse,

"What are they?" she asked.

"Are you Blanche Travers?"

"Yes."

"Then come with me."

"With you?"

"Yes."

"Why! Why!" cried the now thoroughly terrified girl.

"Because it is my wish. It is for your own good."

He dismounted from his dark horse and advanced toward the trembling, shrinking girl and said:

"Blanche, don't be afraid, I assure you I am your friend."

"Where are going to take me?"

"I will explain all in good time."

"No, you shall explain now."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"There is no need for further parley."

He took another step toward her and she wheeled as if to fly, when with a quick bound he was at her side and had seized her in his arms.

"Come, you must go," he cried, and lifting the half fainting girl to the saddle he sprang behind her and galloped away.

CHAPTER II.

THE PLEDGE.

"Where do you intend taking me?" the captive girl asked.

"Hush, I am your friend."

She still struggled, though her strength was almost gone.

"Blanche, keep quiet."

"Villain, release me."

"Believe me, I am your friend."

"If you are my friend why this abduction?" she cried.

"It is for your good."

"Villain, you tell me a falsehood."

She gathered up all her strength for one last mighty effort and strove to break away.

In fact she succeeded.

Tearing herself from the hands of her captor she fell upon the ground.

The fall was so severe as to partially stun her.

Before she could recover sufficient to think of flight, her captor had alighted from the horse he was riding and seized her arm.

With a despairing shriek she swooned.

When the poor girl regained consciousness she was on the horse, being borne like the wind across the prairie.

Into the wood the horse plunged, and then for an hour the great black beast with his double burden hurried along through brambles and thickets, over hill and dale, seeming never to tire.

The dark masked rider never uttered one word.

The moon was rising over the distant hills, and throwing a mellow light over the wood and valley. A lone cabin stands in the wood, and the horseman bearing his burden, gallops up to it.

"Woa, Siroc."

The powerful steed came to a halt and stood panting before the house.

His proud head was erect, and his great flashing eye beamed out over the surrounding scenery.

"Now, Blanche, if you will not believe me I am your friend," said the horseman as he conducted the girl into the house.

The door was locked, but he opened it with a key and entered the house.

There was a candle on a table which he lighted.

The fair passenger from the stage coach sank down into a chair before the masked horseman.

She was very pale.

She was dressed in black and had a mourning veil wrapped about her hat.

It had become loosened and floated at her side.

"Blanche don't be down cast," said the horseman. "for I swear to you I am your friend."

She gazed at him a moment, and said:

"What proof have I of the fact?"

"Do you mind answering a few questions?"

"No."

"You are the daughter of Marlon Travers?"

"Yes."

"Are your parents both dead?"

"Yes."

"Your father was a friend of mine."

"Who are you?"

"Jesse James, the bandit king," he answered, removing the mask from his face.

It was a bold face with a cold, steel-gray eye, which he displayed to the astonished girl. He was a large man, with a short-cropped, well-trimmed beard.

"Have you ever heard your father speak of me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"He was with Quantrell."

"He was."

"There I met him, and a braver man never lived."

"My father was brave man."

"And his daughter has her father's courage!"

"But not his strength. Had I possessed that you would never have brought me here."

"No, it would not have been necessary."

"What do you mean? You talk in riddles. Explain!" demanded the girl.

"That I shall, and in as few words as possible. You are the only child."

"Yes."

"Where were you going?"

"To my uncle's."

"What is his name?"

"Sam Franey."

"Your mother's brother?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I have determined you shall not go."

"Why?"

"Because it would be ruin and death to you to go. He is your enemy."

"He is my uncle, my nearest relative."

"That is true, but all the same he is your enemy."

"How am I to believe it?"

"How am I to make you believe it?" said Jesse James, thoughtfully.

Then he rose from the chair and for a moment paced the floor.

At last he paused before her and stood with his arms folded while he gazed at her.

"Young lady, you are the only child of your father," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Your father died, leaving a vast fortune in Mexico."

"So I have been told, though I have not yet come in possession of the money."

"I know he died rich."

"Why, how do you know it?"

"I was with him when he died. Listen: He breathed his last on my arm, and ere he died exacted a pledge from me."

"From you?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"That I would protect with my life his only child, Blanche Travers."

For a few moments she was silent, then she said:

"I can't believe you."

"What I state is true. I swear that every word I tell you is true," he went on to say. "Your father served with Quantrell, and if you know anything of the James Boys you must know that they were also with Quantrell."

"I know that."

"Once on the battlefield I was at Centralia, Missouri, when we had charged through the ranks of Johnson's men and mowed them down, scattering them over the plains, I had killed Major Johnson with my own hand and was pursuing a red-headed boy soldier when the fellow turned, and firing his musket shot, down my horse. The animal fell on my leg, and the soldier seeing my helpless condition, ran at me with a fixed bayonet to run me through."

"Before he could do it Marion Travers shot him down, and he fell dead at my feet. Then I swore to be his friend forever. Jesse James has been a bad man, I will admit, but no one can say that I have ever gone back on a friend. The war ended, and your father went to Mexico and I on the road. It got so hot that some of us were forced to leave Missouri. My father, Frank and I went to Mexico. There we found your father who had made millions in the mines, for he had struck it very rich. Well, all went well until one night in a gambling saloon one of my men named Al Shepherd raised a row."

"Shots flew thick and fast. We were all assailed and your father fought with us. But he got two bullets and a knife thrust. Either wound was fatal and I knew he could not live long. I carried him to the hotel where we had been stopping and there he died. He made me swear to protect you, and that pledge I will keep."

"His money?"

"Is in the banks in Mexico awaiting your call."

"How much money did he have?"

"In money, property and all, he had ten millions."

The girl opened her eyes.

"That money is all for you," Jesse James continued.

"But I have never received a dollar of it."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"When were you eighteen?"

"Last week."

"Who has been your guardian?"

"My uncle."

"And he has never got one cent of it?"

"No."

"It was well."

"Why?"

"You never would have seen it had he got it."

"You surely do my uncle wrong."

"I do not," Jesse answered. "I know him too well, and know too well what his plans are to permit you to go to live with him."

"Had I the confidence in you that I have in him, I might believe you."

"You will have confidence in me in the course of time, but meanwhile I must protect you whether you will let me or not. I made a pledge to your father that I would, and I will. You were going to your uncle's?"

"Yes."

"He lives in Clay County?"

"He does."

"Did he send for you?"

"Yes."

"For what purpose?"

"We were to go to Mexico after the money."

"Do you know the reason the Mexican authorities would never pay the money nor turn the property over to him?"

"No."

"I was the cause of it."

"Why did you interfere?"

"On account of my pledge."

"Surely my father never doubted my uncle?"

"He did."

"He never had cause."

"He did."

"How do you know?"

"Because he would never have doubted him without cause."

"Then you say he had cause."

"Most assuredly. He made me promise, among other things, that I would never allow your uncle to get your property in his possession."

He was about to make some further remark, when there came a wild clatter of horses' hoofs in the woods, and the next moment the house was surrounded by mounted men.

Jesse James gave utterance to an exclamation of rage and alarm, and snatching his revolver from his belt, sprang to the door. Slamming the door, he bolted it, and crept to the window.

Here he crouched for a moment, and then came the sound of voices without.

"Dismount and see," said one.

"He said he would come here," put in another.

"It's all right," Jesse James said with a quiet laugh as he returned his revolver.

"Who are they?" asked the girl.

"My men."

"Your band?"

"Yes."

"Then kill me."

"Why?"

"Death is a thousand times preferred to such captivity."

"You are perfectly safe."

Rap!

Rap!

Rap! came three knocks on the door.

"Frank, Frank James."

"It is I, Jesse," was the answer.

"I will open the door."

"Be quick about it, Jesse."

Jesse James unholted the door and flung it open.

"What's the matter, Frank?"

"There is trouble ahead, Jesse."

"I don't understand—"

"Timberlake."

The mention of that dread name was enough to fill the James Boys with alarm. Jesse James asked:

"Where is he?"

"In the woods."

"How far away?"

"He can't be more than a mile."

"Have you met him to-night?"

"Yes."

"Anyone hurt?"

"We left three or four of his gang lying in the woods, but our own boys got off with only a few scratches."

"We must go."

Jesse then turned to Blanche and said:

"You must go with us."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because to fall into Timberlake's hands would be to fall into the hands of your uncle."

"You base, deceitful wretch!" she cried.

"Why do you persecute me?"

"Blanche, I can endure your scorn, for I have my pledge with your father to keep."

"Pledge, indeed," she cried. "There is no pledge to keep."

"There is. Come."

"Stand back," cried the proud girl, drawing herself up to her full height.

There was a single moment that Jesse James quailed before the proud, defiant girl, but it was only for a moment. Then he leaped at her and seized her in his arms.

"Blanche, you must go."

"Help, help, help!" she feebly cried.

But Jesse held his hand over her mouth.

She struggled for a moment and swooned.

"Is she dead, Jess?" Frank asked.

"No, only swooned. So much the better, for now we can tote her without any noise."

His horse was brought to the door and Jesse James, lifting the insensible girl as easily as if she had been a feather, carried her from the house and mounted with her upon the back of his noble Siroc.

In a few moments the cavalcade was thundering away through the woods at a breakneck speed.

"There they go, there they go!" cried a voice from the dark woods.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang! rang out pistol shots in the woods.

Bullets whizzed through the trees.

"Away!" cried Jesse, giving his gallant Siroc the rein.

Away he flew like the wind through the forests.

Bushes bent, cracked and snapped beneath their flying feet.

Jesse James, although his steed carried a double load, led all in the flight.

At last he reached an open field.

Siroc cleared the fence and Jesse galloped across the field.

A daring, over-zealous deputy sheriff fired at him and then galloped around the fence into a lane to head off the horsemen.

"Be careful, my friend," said Jesse.

The fellow only yelled and put his horse to the top of his speed.

Jesse crossed the field, and leaping the fence, came to a road.

The deputy followed faster after him.

Wild shouts rent on the air.

"I have you. Stop, surrender!" roared the pursuer.

Jesse James was galloping down a hill and the pursuer came within pistol shot. He fired a shot at Jesse, the bullet piercing the brim of his hat.

"It's my turn now," cried the bandit king, and turning about in his saddle he fired.

When the smoke cleared away, the deputy was lying in the road.

"He will never pursue another person," said Jesse James.

When Blanche Travers next recovered her consciousness she was in a room lying on a bed.

An old woman was standing near her.

"Where am I?" the fair prisoner asked.

There came no answer.

"Where am I?"

The old woman shook her head.

Then she realized that the old woman was deaf and dumb.

Blanche lay for a long time on the bed, trying to gather up her scattered faculties and make out her present situation, but in vain.

She gave it up.

For a day she was alone with the old woman.

Next day Jesse James came to see her.

"Why have you brought me here?" she asked.

"For your own good," he answered.

"Why can I not have my own liberty?"

"I must fulfill my pledge to your father. You must be kept away from your uncle."

CHAPTER III.

THROUGH THE FIRE.

THREE or four days elapsed after the captive Blanche Travers had been taken to the house of the dumb woman. Jesse James, who had remained at the house all the while as a guard, now announced his intention of going away.

He had treated Blanche with the utmost kindness all the while and had assured her that he was her friend.

"I am compelled to go, Blanche," he said. "And I will leave you here. Now you need not

worry yourself in efforts to escape because I assure you it is utterly impossible for you to do so. You will be treated with the utmost kindness, yet the strictest kind of a watch will be kept over you."

"Why don't you let me go?" she pleaded.

"Because, as I have stated, it would now be your ruin."

"How long am I to be a prisoner?"

"You will still consider yourself a prisoner although I have assured you that you are only my guest?"

"An unwilling guest is a prisoner."

"Well, to answer your question, I can not say exactly how long you will have to remain here, but I sincerely hope it will not be for long."

"So hope I."

He took his departure.

Jesse James was ever a watchful, careful man. He had cause to be, for there was a large reward offered for him, dead or alive, and he knew that he had a hundred hungry detectives on his trail.

He went in disguise, wearing a long, sandy beard and wig.

He had not proceeded far before he saw a man mounted on a thin sorrel mare riding leisurely along the road ahead of him. His whole manner was that of a Western man. He wore a white slouch hat, his sun-burned face, long, yellow neck and thin, cadaverous face with dark chin whiskers indicated the Westerner.

"Hello, feller," said the farmer, as Jesse came up with him. "Whar yer goin'?"

"To Liberty."

"Wall, that air a purty right smart kind uv er town."

"Do you live in Liberty?" Jesse asked somewhat uneasily, for he feared that he might have company.

"No."

"Ah, you don't live at Liberty?"

"No."

"Do you go there?"

"Not all ther way."

"What is your name?"

"Tom Briggs, an' them ez know me do say ez how I am ther champion liar o' the United States."

"You seem proud of your reputation."

"Mebbe I be, stranger, but I swar er feller's got ter hev suthin' ter be proud of."

"I suppose so."

"Who be yer, stranger?"

"I am Parson Mose Snow," Jesse answered after a few moments silence.

"Oh, yer a preacher?" and Tom Briggs turned a searching gaze upon the pretended preacher. "Couldn't yer do somethin' with me erbout lyin'?"

"Why don't you quit it?"

"I can't."

"Yes you can."

"No, I can't."

"Repent of your evil," said Jesse, assuming a ministerial tone and dignity.

"Repent! Why, parson, I've shed bushels an' barrels and ship-loads uv tears erbout this ere cryin' evil o' mine, but it don't do no good fer me. I am only gittin' wuss all ther time."

"I believe you are."

"An' I'm sich er liar—I am er reg'lar turn-coat."

"Why don't you turn the truthful side of your coat out?"

"D'yer think it mought help me? Wall, p'r'aps it would. This ere coat hez been a splendid coat fur me, anyway," Tom said, glancing with admiration at his old faded coat. "It hev seen service."

"It looks as if it had," Jesse put in.

"An so it hev. Why, I tell yer, stranger, that air a remarkable coat. I wore it four years and then we used it six years for a table-cloth, then live years we hed it fur a cover on ther bed, and then we use it two years fur a carpet on ther floor. It went ter Californy as ther outside wrappin' fur a box ez was full o' glass. The children used it fur a play house. It was used ter patch er hole in er circus tent, and fur five years it wur ther only door wot we hed. But spite o' all o' that, it's er putty good coat yit."

Jesse James looked at him and smiled.

"Your malady is serious."

"Ain't it?"

"It so seems."

"Guess I'll never get over it."

"You ought to wrestle with the habit."

"Bottle wi' ther habit. Why, my dear gospil pounder I've rattled with ther habit nuth I've erbout worn all ther clothes off'n me, an' got ther wust ov it every time. Why, every time I think I'm got ther habit o' lyin' erbout under it takes

er hold on me and send me ker flumax on ther ground."

"That is bad."

"Yes, wusset luck er feller ever hed."

"Were you ever in St. Louis?" asked Jesse.

"Me?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Look like a man I once saw."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"Guess not in St. Louis."

"Have you a brother?"

"Two."

"They air wide erpart. One's in Calerforny an' one in Maine."

Jesse gave the fellow a very curious glance.

"Don't believe yer believe what I'm sayin'," said the Missourian.

"I don't."

"Why?"

"Because you said that you were such a liar that you could never tell the truth."

"Cau't."

"Why?"

"Dun know, pilgrim. I can't keep ter ther truth."

They now reached a place where the roads forked. Jesse James, without having any very strong suspicion, was anxious to get rid of his traveling companion.

"Well, here we are," said Jesse.

"Wall, I go ter ther right."

"An' I go on the left hand road," Jesse answered.

"That air right, ther sheep go ter the right and the goats ter ther left," chuckled the fellow.

Jesse James pretended not to comprehend the Missourian and galloped along the left hand road, glad to be rid of him.

"Well, I've got the girl on hand, and now what am I to do with her? If she were only out of the way my path would be smooth again, but my pledge I must not break it."

The champion liar of Missouri, as Tom Briggs styled himself, continued to watch Jesse James as long as he was in sight.

Jesse came in sight of a house on the road side, and was approaching it with the intention of making a short halt to rest his horse when he discovered two or three horses tied to the fence.

"Hello, what does that mean?" he asked himself. "Maybe it is some of Timberlake's deputies waiting for me. But no, ha, ha, ha! It can't be that they would recognize me. I am too cleverly disguised for that."

"Halt!" cried a man, suddenly rising up from the opposite side of the fence.

"Hello!" cried Jesse.

"Stop."

Jesse was the more inclined to obey, especially as the fellow had a gun leveled at his breast.

"Put down that gun, friend; it might go off and hurt my horse."

"Stop, I said."

"Well, I have stopped."

"Stand right there."

"I am on my horse."

"Well, don't you move."

"For how long?"

"Who are you?"

"Preacher Moses Snow."

"Where are you goin'?"

"To my appintment down on Billy's Creek."

"Beyond Liberty?"

"Yes—I preach there to-morrow."

"Well, I don't know whether you will or not."

Jesse's uneasiness increased every moment. Was it possible he thought that after all his precaution, his disguise was penetrated and they recognized him?

But the baudit king always put on a bold front.

He noticed two more men walk out from the house with guns in their hands, which they proceeded to cock.

"I'd like to know the meaning of this outrage," Jesse cried. "Why am I brought to a standstill here as if I was one of the James Boys?"

"We don't know but you are one."

"I know more about it than you do."

"Perhaps ye do, but we are going to find out."

"I'll help you."

"How?"

"Do you know any one in Liberty?"

"Some."

"Do ye know Tom Bird, the banker?"

"Yes."

"Well, go und ask him, if he knows old Parson Snow."

The three fellows consulted for a few moments

in whispers. Jesse James, fingers itched to seize his revolver and dash right through them down the road.

"I could escape," he thought, "but I won't do it that way."

His disguise was so complete he determined to risk it.

The conference at last came to an end.

One of the three men said:

"Well, I reckon ye can go on."

"Thank ye, geuts. Comin' over on Billy's creek?"

"Maybe."

"If ye do, come to meetin' an' ye'll hear a hang up sarmin. I'm a reg'lar gospel pounder."

"We'll see erbout it," one of them answered.

The pretended preacher was gone down the road and soon completely out of sight.

"That was a narrow escape," said Jesse James to himself.

He had gone about two miles when suddenly startled by the loud report of a gun.

"Hello! what does that mean?" he cried as he started Siroc to a brisker canter.

"Halt—halt!" cried a voice ahead of him.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Then the wild clatter of hoofs rang out on the air, and he felt the earth almost tremble beneath the tread of horsemen.

"Hello, what means that?" cried the bandit-king. "Some of my poor fellows are hard pressed. Come, Siroc, down to the rescue."

Siroc seemed to comprehend what his master said, and without the stimulating effect of the spur dashed like a thunderbolt up the hill.

When Jesse James reached the crest of the hill he discovered a horseman flying for life hotly pursued by at least a dozen.

"That is not one of my boys," thought Jesse James, the moment he caught a glimpse of the fugitive. "It's a stranger."

The stranger was hotly pursued by a dozen of Timberlake's men.

"Who is he?" Jesse asked himself.

The thoughts of the bandit king were more rapid than flashes of lightning.

Some one was in trouble and he only needed to know that the noted deputies were on one side for him to choose the other.

"Come, come, good Siroc, there is a poor fellow chased like a wild beast; let us to his rescue."

Then with a wild shout he dashed down toward the fugitive.

The poor fellow saw that some one was about to head him off, and drawing a pistol he cried:

"Keep off, keep off, or I will kill you. Beware, I am desperate."

He was a young man, evidently not over twenty-two or three years of age.

His eyes were blazing with fury and excitement.

"Hold, don't shoot me. I am your friend," Jesse cried, when he discovered that he was in danger of getting a bullet in his body.

"You lie! Everybody is my enemy. I am deceived and hunted like a beast."

"Follow me, and I will save you."

"I can't trust you, nor any one."

Jesse James, in a second's time, guessed partly at the young man's history.

Here was a young man who was evidently being chased by officers of the law. Hard pressed and liable to be run to earth, either for some crime committed in the heat of passion, or for some supposed crime.

Jesse James was an excellent character reader, and he discovered at a single glance that the fugitive was not a bad man at heart. His face had a freshness and innocence about it not to be mistaken, and he knew that he could not be a bad man. But he also read in his countenance that he was a bold man, and here was an opportunity to make an acquisition to their forces not to be lost.

"I am your friend," cried Jesse. "See, I will prove it."

Then he wheeled his horse about, dashed down toward the astonished pursuers until within pistol shot, and poured in the contents of his revolver at the advancing host.

All six chambers were emptied in as many seconds, and he saw one man fall wounded, and a horse killed, great as was the distance.

The fusillade caused a check in the advance of the deputies, and then Jesse James wheeled his horse about and dashed back to the thoroughly astounded fugitive.

"Come on with me and I will lead you to safety!" he cried.

"Who are you?"

"Your friend."

"What is your name?"

"There is no time now for explanation," cried Jesse James. "If you would live, come on, follow me. If you prefer to die, remain here."

Siroc, the tireless steed of the bandit king, thundered down a rocky hill and the young man, strangely impressed by the bandit chief's manner galloped after him as hard as his horse could go.

They reached a great valley on descending the hill.

A valley where the bottom grass grew almost as tall as a man on horse back.

The angry shouts of pursuers could be heard in their rear.

"They are coming!" cried the stranger.

"Yes, see! they signal to some one out in the valley," Jesse answered, reloading his revolver as he rode.

"What are we to do?"

"Right ahead."

"Through the tall grass?"

"Yes."

Down the hill they thundered and into the tall grass.

Their horses floundered and plunged along like steeds in deep water.

They had not gone far ere they saw great columns of smoke ascending from the grass ahead of them. The grass was dry and burned very rapidly.

Those pillars of smoke rose higher and higher, and the lips of vast flames leaping up until they disappeared in the blackness of the smoke could be seen.

"What shall we do?" asked the stranger.

"Press on," Jesse answered.

"And meet the fire?"

"Yes."

"Don't you see they have set the prairie on fire!"

"Yes."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Ride right through it."

"Can we?"

"We must try, it's our only hope of escape."

The yells of delight from the posse of deputies showed that they believed they had the fugitives completely surrounded.

"Ride on—right through the fire," cried Jesse, to his companion.

He saw at a glance that there had been but two or three men, at most, on the other side of the valley who had started the fire.

Like thunderbolts they dashed right down upon the roaring, whirling flames. The grass blazed, crackled and roared, and the great lurid flames leaped high into dark smoke.

They were soon so near that they could almost feel the blistering heat.

"Dismount and wrap your horse in a blanket," cried Jesse.

It was done in a few seconds.

Jesse then tore a woolen scarf in two parts and wrapped one around the face of his companion.

Then came the wild charge.

The crackling, roaring flames were heard ahead of them.

The horses trembled as they charged upon the wild blaze.

Louder and louder hissed and roared the fire.

They felt the sparks falling on their persons, but thundered right on.

Down through the blinding smoke and stifling heat with hair and eyebrows blistered they rushed.

Jesse shouted to his companion:

"Hold your breath!" just as they plunged like meteors through the walls of flame.

They came through almost suffocated and badly scorched, but so quick was their charge through the fire that neither man nor horse were seriously injured.*

CHAPTER IV.

A WILD ADVENTURE.

THE three deputies on the hill to which Jesse and his new companion climbed and who had set the grass on fire now fled at their approach.

Just before reaching the high ground the two fugitives plunged into a stream of water, which extinguished the few sparks of fire on their clothes. Then they climbed to the top of the hill and saw the three deputies flying as fast as their horses could go.

Jesse James laughed as he noticed them flying.

"The cowards!" he cried. "With a dozen

brave men I could run a regiment of such rascals."

"They would have killed me but for you."

"Oh, no; they might only have captured you," said Jesse.

"No," he answered, with a sad shake of the head. "I would never have been taken alive."

"Who are you?" Jesse asked.

"I am Luke Miller."

"Where is your home?"

"In the saddle."

"Are you a highwayman?"

"No, not yet, but they may drive me to it," said Luke, his teeth gnashing with fury.

"Why are Timberlake's bloodhounds chasing you?"

"Because I am wanted for a crime I never committed," he answered.

"What was it?"

"A murder."

"Explain."

They had now reached a grove of trees, and both had dismounted to examine their horses.

While they were going over their animals with all the care and pains of expert horsemen, Luke Miller told his story.

"I am an orphan and live with an uncle who raised me. He was always good to me until recently, when we quarrelled about a young lady to whom I was paying my addresses."

"What was her name?"

"Her name was Blanche Travers."

"Blanche Travers!" cried Jesse, in amazement.

"Yes; do you know her?"

"I have heard of her."

"Have you ever seen her?"

"Yes."

"Then you know how beautiful she is."

"Yes, but why should you and your uncle quarrel about her?"

"He did not like her."

"Why?"

"Well, not because he knew anything about her but he bitterly disliked Sam Franey, her uncle and nearest of kin—a man who had partly raised her."

"And a villain!" put in Jesse James.

"Well, maybe he is, but as I told uncle, Blanche was not to blame for it."

"You are right; she is in no wise to blame," said Jesse. "But go on with your story."

"Uncle for some reason hated the whole family, and one day he declared I should never marry Blanche. This declaration was made in the presence of many witnesses. A heated controversy followed, and I in my rage swore I would marry Blanche Travers if I had to wade through blood to my waist."

"That was a foolish threat," said Jesse James.

"It proved to be a very dangerous one," answered Luke.

"How?"

"That very night my uncle was murdered, and my knife, all stained with blood, lay at his bedside. As I was his only heir, and as he had declared his intention to go to next day to the village lawyer and have a new will drawn disinheriting me there was ample cause to believe me the murderer. Warrants were sworn out for me at once. I fled. I knew that it was death to surrender."

"Mounting my own horse and arming myself with my pistols, I became a fugitive. Timberlake's deputies were put on my trail and but for you they would have killed me, for I never would have surrendered."

The story of Luke Miller explained a great deal to Jesse James that had been a matter of mystery before. He now knew why the deputies had been in the neighborhood.

It was Luke Miller instead of the James Boys they were in the neighborhood for.

"What do you propose to do?" Jesse asked.

"I don't know."

"Have you no plans?"

"No."

"You intend to fly?"

"Yes."

"Have you much money?"

"But very little."

"What will you do when that is gone?"

"Alas, I don't know."

"Will you go with me?"

"Who are you?"

"Henry Jackson."

Henry Jackson was the name by which Jesse James usually went.

"Mr. Jackson, you have been very kind to me, but I can not consent to continue to be a burden on you."

"You are not."

"But surely I will be."

"How?"

"You may get yourself into trouble by aiding and assisting one who is a fugitive from justice."

"That is my lookout."

"Then you insist?"

"I do."

"I will go."

Jesse was several times on the point of declaring his identity to the young fellow, but he feared that if he did so it might frighten the young fellow and drive him away from them entirely.

"No, I'll wait the fulfillment of time, and see how the matter goes," said Jesse James. "Perhaps, if the matter is broached gently, by degrees, he may become better reconciled to it, and become one of us."

"Is your horse all right?" asked Luke.

"Yes—and yours?"

"The hair is scorched in one or two places, but he has suffered no great injury."

"Let us mount and be going."

"I am willing."

They crossed a ridge and the now blackened, smoking valley was out of sight.

Only the vast columns of smoke rolling up heavenward and obscuring the sun were visible.

An hour later and this had disappeared. As they were jogging along leisurely they came suddenly upon a man mounted on a thin, sorrel horse.

There was something familiar about the flapping black hat, and faded beard and hair.

He rode leisurely, leaning first one side of the saddle and then on the other, occasionally turning half way round as if to see the approaching horsemen, and bid them to come up to join company.

"Confound the rascal, it is Tom Briggs, the champion liar of Missouri," said Jesse James, as he came in full view of the man and recognized him.

"Who is he?" asked Luke Miller.

"A half crazy fellow. The biggest liar on earth."

At this moment they came up with the man who was slowly ambling along.

"Hello, Parson Snow," the Missourian said.

"You recognize me?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Is this your way?"

"Yes—whar yer goin'?"

"I have almost been burned to death."

"Yer war in ther fire?"

"Yes."

"Who put it out?"

"I don't know."

"Yer rid right through it?"

"Yes."

"Wall, that war some punkins, yer bet. By George, Parson Snow, I saw the blaze o' that fire so high it scorched the blue sky. It's er fact, er else I'm a liar."

"I have no doubt of it."

"Fine thing 'twarn't in ther night."

"Why?"

"Ef it hed abeen ther heat would a cracked ther stars. It's er fact er I'm a liar."

"Yonr powers of exaggeration are simply wonderful."

"D'yer think so?"

"You have given me cause to think so."

"Wall, everybody else sez ther same thing."

"I believe you pride yourself on being the champion liar of Missouri."

"Thar ye've hit it squar, stranger. Why, ef thar war a convention o' all ther liars on airth I guess they'd vote me ther king. Why, I can't no more tell ther truth'n my hoss kin fly."

"It is a bad state of affairs."

"Reckin it air, stranger. Now, I've tried every way possible ter break myself o' this habit from eatin' grindstun's ter chawin' gum, but it ain't all no good. I git wus nur was."

"Are you going home to dinner?" Jesse asked.

"No, I reckon not."

"Do you intend to fast?"

"Oh, yes, I've fasted six weeks."

"You must be a great faster."

"Now yer a shoutin', stranger. Why, I'm the fastinest man yer ever seed. Once I was down in old Mexico. War yer ever in old Mexico?"

"Yes."

"Wall, yer know the ther panthers air awful bad down thar?"

"That's one truth you have told."

"So I hev, ber gosh, lemme chalk that down."

Then Tom Briggs pulled out of an inside pocket of his greasy old coat an old greasy day

* To those who may think this feat impossible, the author will state that he has himself dashed through a prairie fire on horse back with only slight burns.

book and dirty pencil—the pencil and day book looked as if they might long have been the property of some butcher—and made some sort of a memorandum.

This done he returned the book and, proceeded.

"Yer know them them air Mexikin panthers never eat er feller until he begins ter smell. Wall, one day thirteen big panthers got me fast in er cave.

"I knowed jist how ter work 'em, an' lay down jist like ez I war dead.

"Wall, they come up, an' one at a time smelt o' me an' went back to ther door an' all sot down ter wait fer me ter git meller afore they et me.

"Then every day arter they come up thar an' smelt o' me an' went back ter wait. Wall, I kep' up that air ruse for fifty-six days until I starved ther last one o' them thar panthers ter death. I'll never forgit ther look o' disappointment on ther face o' ther last panther when he came up an' smelt o' me an' turned away ter die by ther side o' ther others. Now yer mayn't believe er single word o' what I'm er sayin', but et's true ur else I'm er liar."

"I have no doubt of it."

They soon came to where the road forked and the champion liar of Missouri went off in another direction, saying as he went off:

"I guess I'd better be er goin' hum ur my wife 'll be wantin' ter know wot's become o' me."

The bandit king and his new found companion rode along a path which became wilder, rockier, and more unfrequented as they advanced until night.

When night came they found themselves in front of a vast old stone mansion. One loose flapping shutter creaked in the wind. The old house was three stories in height, and had a gloomy, deserted appearance.

The thin blue smoke issuing from one of the vast old chimneys told them it was inhabited.

Jesse dismounted at the door, and rapped on it with his riding whip.

A window opened, and a man looking out, asked:

"What yer want?"

"To stay all night."

The head disappeared, and the window closed. A few moments later a man came out and led the horses down a rocky ravine where there was a barn of stones.

Here they put the horses, and Jesse and his companion were ensconced in the house.

Having regaled themselves on a dish of fried ham and eggs, they went to a room pointed out for them in one of the upper stories of the house.

Jesse James was nearly always suspicious of persons. It made no difference whether he was among men he knew or total strangers, he was ever on his guard.

But on this occasion he allowed his suspicions to be lulled to sleep.

As for poor Luke Miller he was so tired that he soon fell asleep, and slept as soundly as if he had been at home.

Jesse James was not a profound sleeper.

He had, in fact, not slept soundly since he was a boy.

Again and again had he been roused at all hours of the the night and fled for his life.

He dreamed that he heard a noise.

So plain was the dream to him that he awoke. Could it be a reality?

He listened.

"Whist!" said a voice.

The voice was at the window.

Jesse rose to a sitting position, and thrusting his hand under his pillow, drew out his revolver.

"Is this ther room?" another voice asked.

"Yer bet."

"Wall, Sikes, go ahead."

"Boys!"

"Yes, yes," answered a chorus of voices from below.

"Air yer all right down thar?"

"Yes."

"Why don't yer go on, Sikes?"

"Be ready ter come up of we git in er tussel."

"Oh, go on."

"They may hev pistols."

"Wot ef they hev. They're asleep. Go up thar an' cut their throats afore they wake."

"Mebbe y'd like ter permote yer own health in that way?"

"Go on."

Jesse waited with cocked pistol.

He heard men walking all about the house.

"It seems that we have fallen into bad hands," he thought as he slowly rose, so carefully as not to even rouse the man who was sleeping at his side.

He crept to the window and listened.

There were a dozen men down in the yard below, and from their conversation there could be no doubt but that they intended to kill Jesse and his companion.

"They've got away."

"How d'yer know?"

"Old Bob Garret, who put 'em to bed, sed that he heerd ther gold chink in their pockets."

"Then we'll make er rich haul."

"O' course ef ever Sikes'll go up an' do it."

"I'm ergoin'," Sikes answered, taking one more step upward.

"Go on."

"Ain't I?"

"Don't be so slow."

"Ther rounds on this 'ere ladder air slippery."

"Crowd up behind 'em, boys."

Jesse now made out the top of a ladder resting against the sill of his window.

He got near enough to peep out of the window, and saw the ladder loaded down with men pressing slowly up to the window sill.

"Look keerful, boys, it may slip," said Sikes.

Sikes was almost as high as the window sill, when Jesse James seized the end of the ladder and pulled it down with its human weight.

Wild yells rose on the air as it went crashing down below.

CHAPTER V.

NUMBER 10.

"AWAKE!" whispered Jesse.

He seized Luke Miller's shoulder and shook him.

"Get up."

"What is it?"

"Enemies."

"Officers?"

"Robbers!" whispered Jesse, and he pulled his companion out of bed.

Luke Miller was not a little bewildered as he rubbed his eyes and glared about him.

"Did you say robbers, Jackson?" he finally stammered.

"Yes. Get your pistols."

He seized his revolvers.

"Now what?"

"Dress quickly, while I go to the window."

"I will."

"Are you fully awake?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand the situation?"

"Yes."

Then Jesse crept to the window.

The robbers who had been on the ladder were all piled up in a heap on the ground, wriggling, struggling and cursing. Several had been severely bruised, others were stunned, but none of them were seriously hurt.

Jesse James could not refrain from laughing at the ludicrous figure they cut all mixed up on the ground.

"Who did it?" one asked.

"No one," another answered. "Ther ladder broke."

"It slipped."

"That's what yer git fur crowdin' so many on the ladders to onct," growled the discomfited Sikes. "I jist knowd it 'nd break down."

"It's not broke, it slipped. Here, don't make so much fuss or we'll wake 'em."

"Put up the ladder again."

Two or three put the ladder back in its place against the window sill.

"Now, Sikes can't yer give 'em er hist?"

"Wot yer mean?"

"Go up ther ladder."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Why?"

"I'm hurt. Got er ring bone on my knee."

"Some one else try it."

"Here, Lank Watson, yer not afered ter go fust."

"No."

In a few moments Lank, followed by others, was ascending the ladder.

Jesse turned to Luke Miller and asked:

"Are you dressed?"

"Yes."

"Are you brave?"

"I hope so."

"Do you tremble?"

"No."

"Your courage will be put to a terrible test, and unless you are a man of iron nerve it would be better for you that you had not been born."

"I have iron nerves."

"Are you willing to make a trial?"

"Yes."

"Come to the window."

He followed Jesse and when they had reached the window the bandit king said:

"Now take a pistol in each hand."

"Yes."

"Are your pistols self-cocking weapons?"

"They are."

"Look out of the window."

The sight to be seen below was one well calculated to unnerve almost any one.

The ladder was again loaded with armed men crawling up to the window."

"Put out your right hand as I do," Jesse James whispered, "and empty every chamber of your revolver right down among them."

"I will."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Well, one, two, three, fire."

"Crack, crack, crack, bang, bang, bang, pop!" rang out the shots from both revolvers so rapidly that one could not have counted the shots.

The men on the ladder tumbled down head-first in a pile on the ground. Wild yells filled the air, and then came a volley of bullets and buckshot up against the window.

But Jesse and his companion took care to get out of the way.

A few moments' silence followed and then the wildest yells of rage and pain came from below.

"Some one has been hit," said Jesse James. "There can be no doubt of it. Come and let us get out of here as soon as possible."

"I am ready."

"Reload."

"I have already done so."

"Good for you. You display a wonderful sight of judgment and forthought. One would think you had been in the saddle all your life."

"How are we to get down from here?"

"Follow me."

Back the same way they had come the two men descended the stairs.

At the first landing they found the old man waving his hands and gesticulating wildly while he was pointing to the stairway.

"See here, you old wretch," roared Jesse, seizing him by the throat and thrusting a cocked revolver in his face. "What does this mean?"

"Oh, J—I—I don't know."

"You lie, you do!"

"I beg pardon, I am yer friend."

"Are you?"

"Swear it. Hope I may die if I ain't."

"Then show us the way out of here at once."

"Oh, I will, I will! This way."

"No."

"W—w—what? Oh, don't pint that revolver at me—turn it some other way. It mought go off and hurt me."

"It is very liable to go off and send a bullet through you if you go a step further that way! Now turn about. I know that if we go in that direction we will find the very men we wish to avoid ready to slaughter us."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, what shall I do?"

"Lead us out in safety or I will kill you!"

"This way."

He suddenly turned about and led them across a room and along a hall.

Then they came to a window.

He threw up the window.

"Tain't fur ter ther ground," he said. "Yer kin jump it very easily. Now jist try it."

"Look out, Luke, and I will stand ready to kill him if he betrays us."

Luke glanced out.

"Is the way clear?"

"Yes."

"How far to the ground?"

"Only ten feet."

"You go first."

"All right."

Luke leaped out from the window and alighted on the ground.

"All right," he whispered.

"Now, you villain," whispered Jesse James, choking the wretch who was proprietor of the murderers' den. "I have a great mind to kill you."

"Oh, don't!" he gasped.

"Dead men tell no tales."

"I'll say nothin', I'll swear I'll say nothin'."

"You won't?"

"No."

"I don't believe you."

"Swear me!"

"Oh, you have no respect for an oath, and my swearing you would not increase my confidence in you one bit. If I put a bullet through you I shall be doing the country a service."

"Please don't."

"You found us in your presence and then sent for your myrmidons to put us to death."

The poor wretch trembled, his teeth chattered and his knees knocked together.

He was such a miserable looking wretch that even Jesse James felt compassion for him.

Begging for his life he fell upon his knees and swore to obey Jesse as long as he lived.

"Then go and tell them outside that we are up-stairs yet, and for them to go up the ladder. I will be at the window watching you with a cocked revolver, and if you don't do as I tell you I will put a bullet through your head."

"Oh, dear, I'll be killed, I know."

"You will certainly be killed unless you do as I have said," Jesse answered.

Then Jesse pretended to follow after him and to watch his every movement, although he only went a few paces, when he turned about and, leaping through the window, alighted upon the ground at the side of Luke Miller.

"Luke?"

"Yes."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Any sign of an enemy?"

"No."

"This side seems clear. Can we make it to the horses?"

"We'll try."

"Bravely said. That is all any one can do. Now, Luke, come on."

Each holding a pair of cocked revolvers, they hurried around, keeping close in the shadow of a stone wall, so as not to be seen by any one who was watching for them, and in this way reached the stone stables.

Here they found their horses all right, and saddling them, mounted and rode out of the barn and dashed down the road.

"Thar they go, thar they go!" roared a voice in their rear.

Jesse took off his hat and waving it high above his head cried:

"Here we go, catch us if you can."

The sharp report of half a dozen guns rang out on the night air.

The flashes could be seen, and the bullets came whizzing close past their heads.

"We will soon be out of harm's way," cried Jesse James.

A wild shout of defiance went up on the air and the thunder of horses' hoofs seemed to shake the ground over which they flew.

"We'll show them a pair of clean heels," said Jesse James.

"Yes, two pairs," his companion answered.

Luke Miller had displayed such a degree of courage and coolness on this occasion that he had elevated himself in the mind of Jesse James.

"He will make a capital member of our band," he thought, "if we can only induce him to become one of us."

They traveled for two hours, when Jesse James suddenly gave utterance to an expression of surprise.

"What is the matter?" asked Luke.

"I did not dream we were so near," he said.

"So near what?"

"Friends."

"Have you friends?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Near here. They are not very far away. Will you go with me to them?"

"Yes."

They had not gone five miles until Jesse suddenly turned aside and rode directly toward a bluff.

"Where are you going?" asked his companion.

"Come on."

Luke thought he had surely lost his wits, and was about to implore him to follow the road, for it seemed as if he were riding directly toward the bluff as if he were going to ride right into it.

Suddenly Jesse dismounted and said:

"Luke, I have been a friend of yours."

"I can't deny it."

"I have saved your life."

"You have—I owe my life to you."

"Now I am going to let you into a secret of mine."

"Are you?"

"I am."

"Is it necessary?"

"To your safety it is necessary. And now, Luke, I want to exact from you a promise."

"What is it?"

"That you will never, under any circumstances, for honor, duty, life or death, betray our secret."

There was a moment's hesitation, and then he answered:

"I promise."

"You will never betray it?"

"Never."

"Hold my horse."

"Luke Miller took Siroc's rein in his hand, and Jesse James advanced to the wall or bluff of stone, and seizing a corner of a rock, by his own hands swung it around.

The great stone was really a door on a pivot, and so evenly balanced that one could move it.

When the stone was pushed around there was an opening plenty large enough for a horse to walk through into a great subterranean vault.

Pointing into the dark cavern, Jesse James said:

"There is my secret."

"Do you live there?"

"Sometimes."

"One would certainly be safe from pursuit in there."

"Yes. Now I am going to take you in there. Luke, I am going to trust you, and if you are true to me all will be well and good, but if you prove false then woe to you. I will put you to death."

"I would be worse than a monster to betray you."

"Come on in."

Jesse James then placed a whistle to his lips and blew a shrill blast.

It was answered by some one from within.

He blew twice.

Then came three calls from deep in the vast cavern.

"There, all is right. Lead your horse in, for there is plenty of room."

Luke Miller followed Jesse James into the cavern. When they were inside Jesse turned about and closed the door so that they were in almost total darkness.

"Just wait for a moment," said Jesse James. "I will soon have a light."

A few moments later Jesse James had taken his dark lantern from his inside pocket and lighted it.

Then he turned on the rays of light.

They flashed out over the scene, and revealed a narrow grotto for some distance which entered into a large apartment.

Having entered it Jesse James said:

"Here we will be alone for a while. Now let your horse go. He will find hay and oats at the further end of the cavern."

"Why do you live in this place?" asked Luke, who seemed to have some latent suspicion in his mind.

"Because it is a good hiding-place."

"Then you, too, have been a fugitive?"

"I have—I am now."

"From whom?"

"The same men you dread."

"What have you done?"

"I belong to an order. Do you want to join it?"

"An order! What order?" asked Luke.

"The Council of Nine. You will make number ten."

"What is the object of the order?"

"Mutual benefit and protection of the members."

Luke Miller cast his eyes at the bottom of the cavern, and for a few moments was silent.

There was something he instinctively felt about this order that would be at variance with the strict idea of morality.

"I don't exactly understand the order."

"Well, it's a paying one," said Jesse.

"It is?"

"Certainly, and it is safe. Now, you will soon be out of money. You need more. This order enables one to make money sometimes very rapidly."

Luke took off his hat and scratched his head. Somehow it always helps a man to think to scratch his head.

"Is it all right?" he asked.

Jesse James laughed.

"If I did not think it was all right would I be a member of this society?"

"I guess not."

"Now, Luke, let us be plain."

"All right, sir. Be as plain as you wish."

"You must never betray me. If you do it will be death."

"So I understand."

"This is a business order."

"I think I see through your meaning."

"Well, you are in need of a good safe business."

"Yes—I am."

"One that will make money for you."

"You are correct."

"This business is one that requires courage. It is risky, but it pays. None but the brave deserve riches and reward, and those who do and

dare will win. We want another to make number ten. Will you be that number?"

Luke reflected a moment, and said:

"I am an outlaw already. One without any fault to myself and against my own inclination. Your business is one that the courts don't exactly license, yet I am one of you. Count me as number ten."

"Number Ten!" cried a chorus of deep, hoarse voices, and out from the darkness came eight, tall, dark-masked men holding gleaming daggers in their hands.

CHAPTER VI.

PICKING UP ACQUAINTANCES.

THERE followed the administration of a terrible oath, one calculated to chill the blood of any one.

Then Luke Miller, as honorable a young man as ever lived, was a member of the James Boys gang, one of the worst band of outlaws the world has ever known.

There was no retreat now. His destiny was theirs.

Fate sometimes plays cruel pranks with people, and Fate had certainly played a cruel prank with poor Luke Miller.

A few days were spent at the cavern. If Luke had had any time to think, he might have repented. But the time was wholly taken up in forming acquaintances.

There was but few moments left to leisure. He met the giant, daring robber Cole Younger, and laughed at the jokes of the great one-eyed brigand, George Shepperd. Then there was the nervous, restless little Jim Cummins with his small bullet eyes and wiry frame. There was Jim and Bob Younger, Ed McMillan, Clell Miller and Wood Hite, Zack Hill, Wood Hill and De Hart, and many other daring robbers.

"I want you to study these men and simulate their manners," said Jesse James. "Be always prudent yet brave as a lion."

Though the brigands spent a great part of their time in carousing, singing and dancing there was but very little drinking.

At a word from Jesse even during the most uproarious carousal all became as still as death. During the long evenings the accordion was brought out and Jim Younger played a lively air while the rough brigands danced a wild dance.

Luke Miller found himself among them and in the mad whirl of excitement was almost happy.

He did not intend to be a bad man.

Circumstances over which he had no control had conspired to make him a brigand, and he had resolved to make life as enjoyable as possible.

At the end of a few days he went out on short reconnoitering expeditions. He had picked up several acquaintances among the outlaws, and always went in company with one or more of them.

One day he went out in company with Jim Cummins. Jim rode his sleek coal black steed, a perfect beauty, and next Siroc in speed and endurance.

"Well, we will have a gallop across the country to day anyway," said Jim. "Even if it should come to nothing."

"What could you expect it to come to?" asked Luke.

"Oh, we might see a rich old cattle buyer. Those old fellows carry heavy purses. Sometimes we get three or four thousand dollars from one of them."

Luke shuddered.

For the first time he seemed to realize that in truth and in fact he was a robber.

His heart sank heavy as lead in his breast.

"It was not my fault," he thought. "They brought it on me. I could not help it. Circumstances over which I had no control made me an outlaw."

"I say, Luke, they tell me you were in a pretty close place when Jesse found you."

"Rather."

"Yours is a hanging case."

"I suppose so, but I am not guilty of any offense."

Jim Cummins laughed at this rather incredulously and said:

"'Twon't do any good, boy. You will be strung up as sure as they get you."

"I know it."

"You had better stick with us."

"I shall."

"Well, we'll soon find work for you."

Notwithstanding he was in every sense a robber he couldn't bear the idea of robbing.

Delay the fatal hour as long as possible, he thought, and perhaps something might turn up to clear him of the awful charge of murdering his uncle.

Many times when alone did Luke Miller try to think out who the real murderer could be.

Why was his own knife at the side of the dead man, and why had his own knife done the fatal deed?

He was buried in this painful thought, when he was suddenly roused from the reverie by his companion suddenly crying:

"There's a bird worth plucking now, I'll wager."

In a second poor Luke was called to his unpleasant surroundings.

"Where?"

"Ahead."

Luke gazed over the ridge and saw a man mounted on a good, stout horse riding toward them.

He was well dressed and evidently a well-to-do countryman. In his right hand he carried a drover's whip which indicated his calling.

"It's a cattle buyer," cried Jim Cummins. "Come, he is worth plucking. Put on your mask."

"Why?"

"It's always better in these cases to never let your face be seen."

"Do you really mean to—"

"We really mean to rob him," said the highwayman. "Come, put on your mask and be very quick about it."

Jim Cummins had donned a black mask and Luke Miller soon found himself doing the same thing.

Then the bandit, Jim Cummins, said:

"Luke."

"Well?"

"Have you ever done anything of this kind?"

"Never."

"Perhaps you had better stay behind."

"I will."

"Watch how it is done."

"Yes."

"You might come near enough to overlook the matter and be ready to render assistance in case assistance is needed."

"Yes, sir."

"That's it; about ten or fifteen paces in the rear."

Then the bandit galloped boldly up to the horseman, who was jogging along, unsuspecting of danger.

In fact the cattle buyer was completely absorbed in his own thoughts and had no suspicion of the near proximity of any one until a voice called out:

"Halt!"

"Woa, Ball!"

Then he looked up and saw two masked men advancing toward him.

"Great Peter! what does this mean?" he roared.

"Halt!"

"Who are you?"

"Stand and deliver."

"Robbers!"

Then, wild with terror, he wheeled his horse about, and striking the animal with his whip, he went thundering away at the top of his horse's speed.

"Oh, help, help, help!" he roared.

"Stop!"

"Help! Robbers! Thieves!"

And he continued to lash his horse to the top of his speed.

"Halt or I fire!"

The poor fellow, wild with terror, continued to lash his horse to a dead run. The figure he cut was truly a comical one. A pair of stout legs, a pair of red-top boots and a body bouncing up and down, looking like a frying pan with legs on, was a scene calculated to excite laughter in any one.

"Halt!"

He urged his horse faster.

"Halt, or I will fire!"

He tried to increase his speed.

"Halt, for the last time!"

"Get up, Bally, get up, get up!" cried the fugitive, lashing his horse with his whip.

There was a moment's silence then.

"Bang!" went Jim's pistol.

The hat of the fugitive rolled off on the ground, a bullet through it, and believing his head shot from his shoulders, the fugitive next tumbled from his saddle.

Laughing at what he conceived to be a good joke, Jim Cummins galloped up to the fallen man, who lay rolling and kicking on the ground.

"Is he killed? Have you killed him?" cried Luke Miller, who was but a few rods behind.

"No."

"He must be wounded."

"He is not touched."

Jim Cummins dismounted, and, touching the fellow in the side, said:

"Get up."

"Oh, pray don't kill me, don't kill me," cried the fat fellow, falling on his knees and imploring the highwayman to spare his life.

"Get up, I won't harm you."

"Won't harm me? Then what did you shoot at me for?"

"I am out picking up acquaintances, and this is one of my methods," laughed Jim Cummins.

Then the droll expression on the face of the fat drover was so comical that even Luke Miller was compelled to laugh.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CHAMPION LIAR OF MISSOURI.

"PICKIN' up acquaintances!" gasped the astounded drover. "Well, all I've got to say is that if you pick me up as an acquaintance at any time in the future I wish ye'd do it with something else besides a revolver."

"But I find a revolver such an excellent persuader that I can't hardly resist the temptation to use it."

"You can't?"

"No."

"Well, if you are done persuadin' me, let me go."

"No, not yet. I've a favor to ask of you."

"A favor," growled the fat old fellow, starting up and brushing the dust from his clothes. "What kind of a favor have you to ask? It's not likely as a feller you have skeered almost to death will be grautin' any favors for you."

"Oh, yes, you will."

"No, I won't."

"I still have my persnader."

There was an expression almost ghastly on the man's face as he found the dreaded revolver aimed at his head.

"Come now, we want no foolishness," said Jim.

"What do you want?"

"A loan."

"A loan. What do you mean by wanting a loan?"

"A loan of money."

"Oh, dear, how much, five dollars?"

"All you have."

"Mercy, mercy!"

"Come, hurry up. My creditors will not wait long on me. Hurry up."

"I have no money."

"My rustic friend, it would surely grieve my heart to be compelled to send a bullet through your head."

"Don't do it."

"But I must."

"If you do you will get nothing."

Jim Cummins now became severe, and going still closer to him said:

"Come, come, there is no need of any more nonsense. You started out to buy cattle, and a man never goes out nowadays without having a good sized wallet of gold or greenbacks. Hand over what you have got, or you will be shot first and robbed afterwards."

The fellow, with many groans and protestations, began to take out some things from his pockets.

"Turn your pockets inside out," commanded Jim.

He was so slow about it, for the poor wretch trembled with dread, that Jim Cummins at last dismounted and searched him from head to foot.

While he was robbing the drover, Luke Miller remained at a respectful distance, seated on his horse, a silent spectator of the scene.

"Am I to be linked with such men?" he thought. "Must I be a robber whether I will or not? Is there no way to avoid it?"

The drover implored and threatened by turns, but Jim kept on taking his money, watch and valuables. There were three thousand dollars in greenbacks, a valuable gold watch, and some diamond rings, all together worth as much more.

"What, you rascal, do you really intend to rob me?" roared the exasperated drover. "Oh, I will have you hung for this. See to it. I will—I will."

There was only a few moments taken up in the job, but the drover employed his time well.

"I will have you hung for this," he roared.

"See to it."

"Yes, I will be apt to be there when it is done."

"And so will I."

"Now have you anything else that I would care for?"

"No."

"You have evaded the truth so much that I can scarce believe you."

"Well, search then, thief. Search until you are satisfied."

"You are complimentary in your remarks," Jim remarked. "Now, if you will be less demonstrative and use less forcible language, it will be more congenial to your health."

He became sullen, and Jim Cummins having completed the job of robbing him, remounted his horse and rode away, leaving the drover dividing his time between raging and lamenting.

"Well, Luke, you have had a specimen of the kind of fun we have," laughed Jim.

"Is it not very dangerous?" asked Luke.

"Dangerous, no, not very. Sometimes we run onto a plucky fellow, but he is never rich. Somehow the richest men are the greatest cowards. They accumulate their vast fortunes by oppressing the poor, and are burdened with a guilty conscience to start out with, so when they are confronted with danger they prove to be the most contemptible cowards living."

"But the employees on railroads and stages?"

"Oh, they are poor hirelings and fools too," added Jim Cummins. "They sometimes resist to protect the property of the millionaire or corporation. Fools for doing it too. You ask why. Now let me give you an example. There run on a train through this state a young honest express messenger a few years ago. An agent of one of the wealthiest express companies in the United States. A band of robbers held up the train and proceeded to rob it. The young expressman resisted. He was told to yield and he would not be harmed. But he swore he would defend the property of the company with his life and was shot dead and the express robbed. The express agent was a poor man with a wife and three small children. The company for which he had given his life in the defense of their property was asked to help pay the burial expenses, but refused, saying they were not organized to conduct funerals. The wife and children were in want, but it was not the rich corporation that came to their aid. Now it is the rich and chiefly rich corporations we rob. We take from the rich and give to the poor, so you see we are not so bad after all."

Luke had been listening to the short pathetic story in the utmost silence and when he had finished said:

"There maybe more genuine humanity among robbers than can be found among the rich or a soulless corporation."

At this moment the two highwaymen were startled by a thunder of hoofs.

"Hello!" cried Jim Cummins, looking back behind him. "We are pursued."

"Yes."

"We must separate."

They did separate, going in different directions, and the pursuers pressed hard after them, a part following each.

Wild yells rose on the air.

Closer and closer pressed four men after Luke Miller, until he thought he would have to fight.

For an hour it seemed as if he must inevitably be run down and captured or killed.

He kept his revolver ready cocked in his right hand to defend himself to the last.

But there was no need of it.

In the end his horse proved to possess the greatest powers of endurance, and distanced the others.

Away they flew over hill and dale.

The pursuers fell further and further behind until at last they were lost.

Two hours later Luke halted by the banks of a stream to allow his horse to drink and rest.

"Why, hillo, feller," said a voice on the bank of the creek, "looks ez if ye'd er been ridin' some."

Luke Miller turned his eyes in the direction of the voice, and saw a man sitting on a large stone at the edge of the water fishing. He had a long rod and reel, and by his side was a basket of bait.

There was something in that lank figure, faded beard and hair that was familiar.

"What are you doing?" the fugitive asked.

"Doin'! Why, I'm er ketchin' whales liyar, I tell yer, palner, jist ketchin' whales."

"I don't see any of them."

"Wall, yer jist wait till yer see me flop one out. Now I'll tell yer a fish story wot's true, too. Once I war agoin' up ther Missouri river in er steamboat, ther Forest Queen. Wall, we hed er quarter o' beef erboard, an' ther captain he war skeered that it war ergoin' ter spile, an' he put it on a anchor an' throwed it overboard. Fust thing we knowed ther steamboat war jerked this er way an' that, and jerked down stream an' up stream, twenty miles at er lick. Wall, when

we came ter look at ther cause, er cat lish five times bigger hed swallowed ther meat au' anchor, too. We tried hard ter ketch ther fish, but hed ter cut ther cable an' let it go."

"Is that true?"

"True or I'm a liar."

"I believe I have seen you before," said Luke.

"Mebbe yer hev."

"Are you not Mr. Tom Briggs?"

"That air me, Tom Briggs, ther champion liar of Missouri."

"Where do you live?"

"Anywhar."

"Where are you going?"

"Nowhar."

"What is your business?"

"Tellin' lies an' fishin'."

"Then you don't expect any one to believe you?"

"No, I am ergoin' ter hev my tongue canterized."

"Why?"

"So I can't talk."

"Don't you want to talk?"

"No."

Luke was amazed.

"Why?"

"When I talk I lie."

"And that is the plan you are taking to cure yourself?"

"Yes. Ye'd better go on, I hear horses ercomin'."

Luke heard horses' feet coming also, and vaulting in the saddle left the champion liar of Missouri still fishing.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALONG THE MISSOURI.

So often had Luke Miller been compelled to fly for his life, that he had actually become accustomed to it. He heard the thunder of horses hoofs coming hard in his rear, and put his horse to his best speed.

Away he flew over hill and dale. Along the road, not a fourth of a mile in his rear, came the pursuers under whip and spur.

Luke had grown to have such implicit confidence in his horse that he had little fears of being overtaken by any pursuers.

Away he sped, sometimes whistling merrily.

A hedge fence now rises up directly before him.

Missouri, perhaps, boasts of more hedge fences than any other State in the Union. Mile after mile of hedge are sometimes to be seen forming a green lane through the road runs, and making a wall so thick that a frightened hare can hardly squeeze through it.

But the pursuers see the hedge and plowers put out on either side so as to head off the fugitive if he should attempt to go around it.

Luke discovered their plan, and with a defiant shout dashes right at the hedge. His horse clears it at a tremendous bound, roaring over it like a bird, and the youthful cavalier turns in his saddle and swings his hat and defiance at his pursuers.

They have witnessed the feat, and with loud yells three of them clear the hedge, and it then becomes a race across the meadow. Suddenly before them is heard the roaring of water and the white foam from a torrent flowing through a ditch, too wide, it would seem, for a horse to possibly leap it, is before Luke Miller.

But his three deadly enemies are pressing hot in his rear, and he goes forward like the wind.

With a shout to encourage his horse he plunges his spurs in his flanks and the animal springs into the air. For a single second the roar of thundering waters is heard below and the seething, hissing, boiling torrent seems ready to swallow him up.

But the horse soars over like a bird and strikes the opposite shore. The clayey bank yields beneath his hind feet and great chunks fall into the water, but the horse recovers himself and next moment is flying up the hill.

The pursuers gave yells of baffled rage.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang! came three shots from the opposite shore. The bullets whiz through the air and one of them almost touches the brim of the fugitive's hat.

"You must not have it all your own way," shouted Luke, and wheeling about he fired a shot at the men.

The distance was great, but he saw one clasp his arm and utter a yell of rage and pain.

"Hit him sure as I live," cried Luke. "Not a bad shot. Well, I guess I got the best of that race. If they want me now they will have to

ride down to the bridge, which must be half a mile or more away from here."

He galloped over the hill, leaped a stone fence, crossed a road, traveled down a lane and passed through a gate, rode through an orchard, leaped a rail fence, and found himself in a broad meadow.

He had gained the top of a hill when he saw the broad bosom of the Missouri river.

"I have reached the river," he thought.

"I wonder what I am going to do now. My horse is fresh and good for many hours' travel yet, but he must give out in time. I have no place to rest, and lost even the friends I did have—the James Boys."

Luke felt himself actually sighing for the companionship of the banditti.

They had proved his friends, and had protected him in time of danger.

All the world was his enemy.

"I have done nothing to merit all this," he said to himself. "I never killed my poor unfortunate uncle; but how came my knife there? It was my knife that did the deed. I would have been the last man on earth to harm him, but the world will always believe me a murderer."

He was riding along a road which ran parallel with the great river, when he came suddenly face to face with a pair of horsemen.

"Hello, young man," said one of them, "where are you going?"

"To Waverly," he answered.

Waverly was a small town not more than ten miles from where he was.

"Do you live in Waverly?"

"No, sir."

"Where do you live?"

"In Arkansaw."

"What part?"

"Fort Smith."

"Why are you going to Waverly?" asked one of the horsemen.

"To see an uncle of mine."

The two horsemen had reined in their steeds directly in front of him, and there was something menacing in their manner. The right hand of Luke Miller gradually dropped on the handle of his revolver.

The act seemed an unconscious one, but his eye was keenly studying them, and he was asking himself how he could dispose of both.

"Well, there isn't nothing wrong in your going to Waverly, young man, but we want to know if you have heard anything of the James Boys?"

"No," he answered, after a moment's hesitation.

His conscience stung him for the lie.

A man has to become thoroughly steeped in sin before he will cease to be rebuked by conscience at a willful lie.

"You've heard of them, haven't you?" asked one of the men.

"Yes."

"Often?"

"Of course."

"Well, haven't you heard of them of late?"

"Yes, about two weeks or so ago I heard of them. They had been robbing a train or a bank, I forget which."

"Never saw one of them?"

"No."

Again he felt a twinge of conscience at the falsehood he had told.

"They are in the neighborhood, I am quite sure," said one of the men. "Our men jumped some of them up this morning over on the Platte river and ran them a long distance, but they finally got away from us."

"How far is it to Waverly?" asked Luke.

"Ten miles."

He went on. The horsemen cast suspicious glances at him, and he returned those glances as he rode away.

"They suspect me," he thought.

Night came, and he stopped at a cabin on the banks of a river for food and rest. He had his horse fed, and after waiting for an hour or two for the beast to rest and refresh himself he again started along the road, keeping close to the Missouri river.

The moon rose and the night had begun.

It was a lovely night. The crickets sang far and near, making the night melodious with the music of nature. It was a night such as one loves to wander along the banks of the great silent river.

He heard a puffing, and a few moments later a little stern wheel steamboat, one of those relics of a past commerce which still occasionally wander up and down the Missouri river, passed up the stream.

Suddenly a voice cried:

"Halt!"

The protruding muzzle of a gun poked out from a dense thicket of bushes gave emphasis to the command.

He came to a halt and gazed at the gun.

He could see right down the barrel. It was a musket bore with ugly-looking rifles, and the fact that he was looking right into the gun was proof positive that the aforesaid gun was pointed at his head.

He came to a halt.

"What does this mean?" he asked.

"I've got orders not to let any one pass here."

"Who gave such orders?"

"Timberlake, the sheriff."

"Oh, you are a deputy?"

"Yer bet I am, pilgrim, an' now don't yer go ter comin' any kerflummy diddle over me, or dod sink yer blasted carcass, I'll perforate yer with er bullet."

"Well, I am not going to come any kerflummy diddle over you if I know what it means," the horseman answered. "But I would like very well to know what authority Mr. Timberlake, even if he is sheriff of the county, has to keep people from going where they want to."

"Wall, I'll tell yer."

"Proceed."

"That's ther James Boys turned loose on er young feller, wot's wuss, they do say is with 'em."

"Who is he?"

"Luke Miller."

"What has he done?"

"Killed his uncle."

"He never did it."

"They say he did it."

"Then they lie!" Luke answered indignantly. "I know something about it myself, and I know that he never killed his uncle."

"La, do ye!" the sentry who had been stationed at this part of the road to watch for Luke Miller, the supposed murderer, and see that he did not pass by, became so much interested that he stepped out from the bushes into the road. "Yer know all erbout it, do ye?"

"Yes."

"Who did it?"

"I don't know. He didn't, and here goes to you."

Whack! came the butt of his revolver down on the skull of the man with such crashing force that the sentry fell senseless to the ground.

And away went Luke Miller down the Missouri river.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MOVERS' CAMP.

THAT night Luke slept in a barn loft, while his horse fed in the manger below.

Before day dawned he was awake and away.

He halted for breakfast, and had just finished it when he was somewhat startled at hearing the measured dip of oars, for the house at which he stopped was on the river bank.

He put his hand on his revolver and leaped out of the house just as a man in a boat pulled into shore.

There was something familiar in his slouch hat and angular, awkward manner.

"Hello, youngster, we've met agin, an I'm er liar, which I allers reckon I am."

"You are Tom Briggs."

"Wall, that air my cognomen an' no mistake erbout it."

"Where are you going?"

"Goin' home."

And he pointed up the hill.

"How many homes have you got?"

"Wall, I reckon ez I ain't got but one."

"Yesterday you pointed towards the west, and to-day you point towards the east when I ask you about your home."

"Wall, podner, ther fact is I am sich a liar I can't tell no one whar my home is."

"Where have you been?"

"Been out all night er bottliu' up moonshine."

Then Luke Miller smiled.

That mysterious personage, who seemed to be everywhere at the same moment, winked and said:

"It's er fact, ur I'm er liar."

Then Luke left the place, and had not gone far before he overtook an old man, who was sitting at the roadside.

By his side was a large bundle, and it was evident that the old man was a peddler or a foot traveler.

"Hello, youngster, wher yer goin'?" he asked, shaking his long white beard.

"To Waverly."

"Look like yer war lost."

"Well, I am."

"Now I shed think so. Git down an' rest yer hoss."

There was something about this old man which was strangely familiar, and at the same time pleasant to the fugitive.

Luke Miller could not understand why he was so strangely drawn towards him.

"Oh, git down, git down. Nothin' ain't er goin' ter hurt ye."

"I am not afraid of nothin'," Luke answered, as he alighted.

"Now, set down an' tell me who yer lookin' fur."

"Did I say I was looking for any one?"

"No."

"Then why ask me the question?"

"Bekase yer are."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I tell fortunes."

"Do you?"

"Read people like books. Tell ther future ez well ez ther past," said the old man, with a quiet chuckle.

"You are then a remarkable man."

"Some say ez how I am."

"Where did you come from?"

He pointed up the river.

"And where are you going?"

"Back."

"Up the river?"

"Yes."

"Well, now, tell me why you wanted to stop me?"

Luke had some lingering suspicions of the old man, and kept his hand on his revolver lest he should attempt to arrest him.

"Say, young man, yer needn't be er keepin' yer hand on yer pistol. I ain't er goin' ter hurt yer."

"I don't know you."

"But I know yer. I'm yer frieud."

"Who are you?"

"Old Snow Top. That's the gilt-edge, mer-rocker bound cognomen by which I'm called."

"Old Snow Top, why did you stop me?"

"Cause I wanted ter talk with yer."

"With me?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

"Erbout yerself."

"Are you interested in me?"

"Er blamed sight more'n yer think."

"Why should you be?"

"Wall, that don't make no difference ter you. Now yer want ter find some friends, don't yer?"

"I didn't say so."

"I know it all ther same."

"What if I do?"

"Yer dun know whar they air do yer?"

"No."

"Thar we're gittin' erlong."

"Who are you? You are not what you pretend. You are no old man."

"Oh yes I air, yes I air."

"Well, what more have you to say?"

"Now ef ye'll do jest ez I say ye'll find them air friends o' yourn in er shake o' no time."

"What shall I do?"

"Wait et ther big tree er mile from here until night."

"There are many big trees along the road and I might pass the right one."

"No, yer jist give yer attention ter me. That's right, keep yer hand on yer pistol ef yer want to; I don't keer. I ain't got no notion o' jumpin' on ter ver an' ef yer want ter shoot down er pore old feller like me why I can't help it et all."

"I will never take life save in self-defense."

"That air what I supposed. Wall, now lister, go jist er mile erlong this road an' ye'll see a big oak tree. It air the biggest oak tree on ther road. All the air the trees erround it nd be hazel switches ter it. Wait thar until night an' by ther jeminy cracklins yer won't hev so very long to wait nuther. When night comes ride at er walk erlong this road for two miles more an' ye'll come out er camp o' movers."

"What am I to do then?"

"Stop."

"At the camp?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Until yer friends come."

"Perhaps I might have to stop there forever."

"But yer won't. Ye'll see 'em afore mornin'. Now, thar air my instructions an' see yer don't forgit 'em."

The old fellow rose and leaning heavily on his staff hobbled slowly down the road.

Occasionally he would pause and look back at the astounded Luke.

"Do jist ez I say an' lemme tell yer right now that ye'll never be sorry far it."

"Well, this is an adventure worth having," said the fugitive to himself, as he paused at the side of his horse. "There will be no harm in looking for the tree at any rate."

The tree was reached.

It was all jist as he had described it.

Then the fugitive felt strangely impelled to wait until night.

He did so.

As soon as the shadows of night had fully gathered over the scene, he mounted and jogged along the road at a walk.

Soon he saw fire lights gleam in the distance.

"It's the movers' camp," he said to himself.

The fires were burning brightly, and forins could be seen moving about.

"I see the great covered wagons of the movers," he thought.

He came nearer, and could hear men and women talking and laughing.

Supper was being prepared in a real gypsy fashion.

On reaching the camp an old fellow, with a patch over one eye, cried:

"Hello, yer come, hev yer?"

"Yes."

"Wall, we've been lookin' fur yer."

"Did you expect me?"

"Course we did; light now."

"I don't know whether I shall or not."

"Oh, dismonnt—thunder, we air all friends."

"I don't know you."

"What ef yer don't, we air friends, all ther same. Come, git down, and stay with me."

Luke Miller slowly and reluctantly dismounted. He kept his hand on his revolver.

"Now, tain't no use ter do that. We ain't ergoin' ter hurt yer," chuckled the old man with a patch over his eye.

Luke looked about over the movers who were scattered about the camp.

They paid no attention to him, but seemed wholly intent on their business of making their camp pleasant and comfortable.

"Come up ter ther fire."

"What will I do with my horse?"

"Hyar, Bill Botts, take this man's hoss an' let 'im pick."

A rough, surly-looking fellow with a fiery red head came and took away the horse.

"I am very much afraid that I am getting myself into trouble," Luke thought, but he said nothing.

"Now set down."

Luke sat down before one of the fires.

"Whar yer goin'?"

"Coming here."

"Some un sent yer, didn't he?"

Luke hesitated.

"Didn't some un send yer?"

He was still silent.

"Oh, thunder, wot yer mean by hein' so bashful, why don't yer speak out, I know some un told yer ter come?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

"Don't know."

"Didn't he tell yer his name?"

"He called himself Old Snow Top."

"Warn't that his name?"

"I don't know."

"What war he like?"

"An old man with white beard and hair."

"Ever see him afore?"

"No."

"Do he look like him?"

He pointed behind Luke, and the fugitive, looking in that direction, saw the same old man whom he had met on the river bank.

Coming up to the camp-fire, he made a signal, and the other campers came forward within the circle of the fire-light.

"Unmask," said the old man.

And then the wigs and false beards came off, and the amazed Luke Miller stood in the midst of the James Boys' band.

He who called himself Old Snow Top was Jesse James himself.

"Now you are among your friends," said Jesse James.

CHAPTER X.

BLANCHE AND LUKE.

LUKE MILLER could scarce believe his eyes.

"You are among your friends," Jesse James repeated.

"Is it possible?" he gasped.

"Oh, yes, quite probable and true."

"But why are you masquerading in this way?" asked Luke. "Some of you disguised as old men, some as young men, and some as women?"

Jesse James laughing answered:

"You will learn before you have been with us long, my friend, that we have more disguises and schemes than you ever heard of. Come now, you must put on a disguise and become one of our number. Here is a shaggy beard and slouch hat. I think they will do. Now put them on."

In a few moments, Luke Miller had changed his appearance so completely that his most intimate friend would not have known him. He even changed his dress, donning an old suit of clothes which were given him, and became a typical southwestern nomad in a few minutes.

Meanwhile, every one of the James Boys' gang had donned their disguise, and were busily engaged preparing supper and encamping for the night, when they heard the tramp of horses' feet coming down the road toward their camp.

The steed came at a slow shambling gait like an old country plow horse that had been worn out with toil.

"Wall, I blush ter exclaim," cried a voice which was familiar to Luke Miller and Jesse James. "Ef hyar ain't a gang o' movers, I'm er liar. Say, old gran'pop, whar yer goin'?"

"Ter Oklahoma," Jesse answered.

"Air yer, wall, now yer a shoutin', mister. Why I tell yer thet Oklahoma air ther gawden spot o' ther airth. D'yer know it?"

"Course I do. Hev yer ever been thar?"

"Wall, now, I shed grunt ter declar. Been thar? Why, I've been all over ther land from eend to eend, an' lem me tell yer it air ther finest part o' this ere footstool, an' don't yer furgit it."

"Sile rich!"

"Richest sile on airth. Yer may plant er crowbar an' it'll sprout er tenpenny nail afore mornin'."

"Wall, that do beat all."

"Beat all, why it beats the Doch. Why, ther grass grows so tall people build their houses on ther blades."

"Yer don't say so."

"I do say so an' it's er fact or I'm er liar."

"No doubt on it."

"An' ther trees grow so big thet I've known fellers ter chop three weeks on one side o' a tree, an' then go erround it, jist ter see how big it was an' they found seven men on t'other side, who had been cuttin' erway on it for seven weeks. They war cuttin' that air tree ter bridge ther Gulf o' Mexico an' open up stage route ter Cuba. Now thet's er fact, or else I'm er liar."

"Guess thar ain't no doubt erbout it, Mr. Briggs," said Jesse James.

"Now I'm not usually given ter exaggeration, stranger, an' I wouldn't misrepresent er country ter yer if I could, but Oklahoma air a land whar yer can't misrepresent. It seems ter me ter be er land whar was created jist especially ter keep men from lyin'. Yer can't be in braggin' o' that country. Now vegetables grow in er night. I've known people ter plant corn one evenin' an' have roastin' ears fur dinner next day, an' pumpkins, oh, how they do grow! Now I'm ergoin' ter tell yer jist how I lost a big white sow ouce and six pigs all on ercount o' a pumpkin. When they plant pumpkins in Oklahoma they bev ter wall 'em in ur ye'll never git any pumpkins, ther vines run right off with 'em. I didn't know this an' next mornin' arter plantin' ther seed I got up an' found a pumpkin vine with a half grown pumpkin ergrowin' past my door. I heerd er squealin' and saw my ole white sow an' her six pigs ertrottin erlong arter the pumpkin tryin' ter overtake it an' eat it but it growed so fast ther vine erdraggin' the pumpkin erlong over ther ground thet ther hogs couln't ketch up with it, an' I'm er liar ef it didn't jist tote 'em right erlong ercross ther state o' Texas inter ther Gulf o' Mexico an' I lost 'em."

The champion liar of Missouri who seemed determined to make Munchausen ashamed of himself, wound up his interview with a few more stories as improbable as the sample we have given, and then rode away declaring that his wife was waiting for him and he must go home.

"Where are we going now?" Luke asked Jesse, as soon as he was alone with the bandit king.

"We are trying to find a place of safety where we can remain for a few days and rest."

"I need rest."

"Have you been having any adventures since parting with us?"

"Yes. Almost every day I have been chased by some one, and was never able to say my life was my own."

"One can never call his life his own when he takes to the road."

"Do you know him?"

"The liar who left here?"

"Yes."

"I have met him before. We were together once when we met him, you remember?"

"I do remember. He is a very odd man."

"So he is."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"No."

"Hasn't he told you he lived somewhere near?"

"Yes, but I don't know just where his home is."

"Do you think he does all that lying for his own amusement?"

Jesse James reflected for a moment, and then said:

"Well, I don't know. It looks very much as if he was playing an eccentric part."

"I thought so."

"He'll hear watching."

"So he will."

"If he turns out to be a detective he shall share the fate of John W. Witcher and others."

"Oh, no. You surely have blood enough on your hands already without taking more lives?"

"But a detective I will kill as freely as I would a rattlesnake," said Jesse James.

The movers remained in the camp until an hour after midnight, and then all gathered up their traps, loaded the wagons and started on their journey.

It was not yet daylight when they came to a cluster of log houses on the Missouri river. It seemed as if a small village had been constructed there.

"What place is this?" asked Luke, as he noticed that the mules were well headed toward it.

This is our rendezvous," said Jesse.

"Is it safe?"

"As safe as any."

"Some one is here?"

"Yes."

"Enemies?"

"No—friends."

"You left them here?"

"Yes."

The wagons stopped in the midst of the cluster of houses, and the movers began to get out and go to the various houses.

The horses and wagons were driven away into the woods. Luke Miller was conducted to one of the houses, the largest in the collection, and told that he would find an apartment there where he could sleep.

An excellent bed was quite inviting to him, and he was soon asleep.

Next morning he was aroused by hearing voices in an adjoining room. He soon discovered that one was the voice of a woman and the other Jesse James.

"I must—" Jesse was saying. "Remember my pledge. I must keep my pledge."

"I don't see why it is necessary to keep me a prisoner."

"If you were free your uncle Sam Franey would have you, and such a captivity would be worse than this."

"Let me go."

"Blanche, I cannot."

Luke Miller recognized the voice. Hurriedly dressing, he crept to the door and listened.

After a few moments he said:

"It's Blanche Travers," he whispered. "She here a prisoner? I must rescue her."

He had been with the James Boys long enough to know how desperate they were. But with the knowledge that they were cruel, merciless and avenging, he determined to rescue the girl.

Jesse James was speaking again, and he bent his ear closer to the door and listened.

"Blanche Travers, I have told you repeatedly that I was your best friend. You know how I pledged myself to your father in his dying hour to protect you with my life. You know that there is a fortune awaiting you, as I have said, and that if your uncle, Sam Franey, could but remove you, he would be the heir to all those millions."

"But I can escape him."

"You can't."

"Why?"

"He has detectives on your trail."

"But I don't believe my uncle so cruel."

"I know him better than you."

"When did you form his acquaintance?"

"Years ago, during the war. He has several times tried to join our band, but he is too dishonest to even be a robber."

"I should have my choice."

"Not when it's to your detriment."

Then Jesse rose and left the house, and Luke Miller was all anxiety to get in the room where Blanche was, make known his presence, and assure her that he was at hand to defend her against all foes, and release her from captivity. It never once occurred to him that what

Jesse James was saying might be true, and that he was in truth protecting the fair prisoner from her uncle.

With wildly beating heart he waited at the door and listened to see if Jesse James was still near the house.

No, he was gone.

Then he slipped back the bolt in the door and threw it open.

Blanche heard the door creak as it opened, and turned quickly about.

Had an apparition suddenly appeared in the doorway, she could not have been more astounded than she was to see Luke Miller in the door.

"Luke!" she cried.

"Hush!" he whispered, placing his finger on his lips to enjoin silence.

Then he glanced about the room, peeped through the door by which Jesse James had made his exit, and listening a moment to assure himself that he was not near and then turned toward the captive.

"Luke Miller, is it you, or do my eyes deceive me?" Blanche asked in a whisper.

"It is I, Blanche."

"Are you, too, a prisoner?"

"No; see, I am armed," he answered, pointing to his revolvers.

"Go away—go away at once, or you will be seen here and killed," she whispered.

"Have no fears, Blanche."

"But do you know who these men are?"

"The James Boys."

"The robbers?"

"I know it. How long have you been here, Blanche?"

"Only three days in this house."

"Are you a captive?"

"Yes."

"Where were you captured, and why were you taken?"

"I was on a stage coach which the James Boys robbed."

"Did Jesse James then carry you away?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He said to keep my uncle from getting me."

"Your uncle?"

"Yes, Uncle Sam Franey."

"I overheard a part of your conversation and now I understand it all."

"The bandit king claims to be my friend."

"Does he? Perhaps he is."

"But he won't give me my freedom."

"Blanche!"

"Luke."

"Don't be afraid. I am near, and you shall have your freedom."

"When?"

"Soon."

"Will you free me?"

"I will, or die!"

"Thank you, Luke."

"No thanks now. Wait until I have accomplished my work and then you may thank me."

She was silent, and for several moments Luke Miller was thoughtful. At last he said:

"Blanche, I must go now, but don't be discouraged. You shall have your freedom, never fear."

"Where are you going?"

"I shall always be very near to you. At no time will I be beyond call if you require me, and when the opportunity comes you shall have your freedom."

She seized his arm as he was going away and said:

"Luke Miller, we have known each other almost since childhood, and I believe I can trust you."

"You can."

"I am in great distress now. Don't desert me."

"I swear I will not," he answered.

Then he left her with a ray of hope in her clouded soul.

As he emerged from the house he mentally declared:

"I will rescue her or die in the effort."

Then he thought:

"But she will know that I am one of the banditti, and when she is rescued, what am I to do with her?"

"Poor Luke Miller was in a desperate strait."

CHAPTER XI.

LOVE AND DUTY.

LUKE MILLER left the house and wandered among the collection of buildings or village without any particular object.

His mind was busy.

Plan after plan for the escape of the girl was

laid, to be abandoned almost as soon as laid, as impractical.

He noted as he walked along that the village was in the heart of a great wilderness.

The houses were all new, and the logs cut and notched down so as to fit close and not leave a single crack large enough for a mouse to crawl through. Small port-holes were cut in the sides of the houses, through which the persons within could shoot and defend themselves.

The houses were in fact more like the old block houses of forts than modern structures.

There were several men lounging or walking about. Some women and even children were to be seen.

These were the wives and children of the banditti, for nearly all of the James Boys band were domestic men.

Luke was wondering how these wild reckless men, amid a life of outlawry and crime, could find time to enjoy the society of their families.

There was a long road or street with a row of houses on either side. He was making his way along the street toward the woods, when he discovered Jesse James coming toward him.

"Eh, Luke, you are up, I see."

"Yes," Luke answered.

He felt a strong inclination to draw one of his pistols and shoot the bandit down.

"Where are you bound? Just out for a walk?"

"Yes."

"Well, what do you think of Jamestown?"

"Is that the name of this village?"

"Yes."

"I wonder that you can live here."

"Why?"

"The officers will find you out and capture or kill you."

"Oh, we live here as peaceable, quiet citizens."

"Do you?"

"Yes. Now, Luke, I want to talk with you. Come with me."

He turned about and walked down a path which led through a dense wood.

Luke followed him. They came to a log and both sat down.

A long silence ensued, and at last Jesse James said:

"Luke, I want to talk to you about her."

"Who?"

"Oh, you have seen her, you need not try to deceive me."

"If you mean Blanche Travers, I have seen her."

"I knew you had."

"Well, what if I have?"

"By the way, you are an old acquaintance of hers, are you not, Luke?"

"I have known her since a child."

"Lovers?"

"Yes."

Then Jesse was silent, his eyes on the ground.

"I supposed you were, and I intended for you to meet."

"Why?"

"Because I am ready to talk with you about Blanche."

"That subject above all others interests me most," said Luke Miller. "Why is she a captive?"

"She is not."

"Not a captive?"

"No."

Gazing at him with an incredulous stare, Luke answered:

"She thinks she is."

"She mistakes—she is my guest."

"An unwilling guest, I should judge."

"That may be true, but my guest all the same."

"What difference, Jesse James, can there be between an unwilling guest and a prisoner?"

With a low, chucklin laugh the bandit king answered:

"You would find quite a material difference between being Jesse James' guest and Jesse James' prisoner."

"Call her a guest, then, Jesse. Why is she detained here any longer?"

"Well, that is just what I wanted to talk with you about, Luke," said Jesse James, in the calmest, evenest kind of a voice. "I knew that you would think it rather strange, and concluded that it would be better to explain everything to you."

"All right, go ahead."

"Blanche has an uncle, Sam Franey."

"I know him."

"What kind of a man is he?"

"I don't like him. He is a penurious, selfish fellow, whom I have often thought was but little better than a thief."

"Do you think him a suitable man to be the

guardian for a minor who was worth several millions?"

"No."

"He is."

"Who is the heir?"

"She is Miss Travers."

"Blanche?"

"Yes."

"But surely she is not worth several millions?"

"She is."

"I have never heard of it."

"Haven't you?"

"No."

"She didn't know it herself until I told her."

"Her uncle is her guardian."

"Yes, and she lacks a few months of being of age."

"Now I have every reason to believe if that uncle gets possession of Blanche he will kill her and become her heir, or in some other way get possession of her great fortune."

Luke Miller was silent for several moments and then said:

"From what I know of Samuel Franey he is not a good man, and yet I can hardly believe he would be so bad as that."

"Have you no confidence in me?"

"Yes."

"Don't you believe what I tell you is true?"

"You may be mistaken."

"I could not be. I know that Franey contemplates putting the girl out the way and inheriting her fortune."

"How do you know it?"

"The villain once attempted to hire me to do the deed."

"What answer did you make?"

"I answered that I would neither do the deed nor permit any one else to do it."

Luke Miller rose from the log and kicked his heel restlessly in the ground.

"Well, are you satisfied?" Jesse James asked.

"Yes."

He answered after a few moments hesitation.

"No, you are not. Admit the truth; you know you are not satisfied."

"You are right, Jesse James."

"What do you want?"

"I want that girl's freedom."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Well, in course of time she shall have her freedom."

"Why can't she now?"

"Because it would not be best."

"Jesse James, I can't help but have doubts. You may have some other reasons than those you have mentioned for keeping her a prisoner."

Jesse laughed, and answered:

"You will have to take my word for what I say. I have no proof."

At this moment a sharp report rang out in the woods on their right, answered by a yell of rage, fear or pain, or perhaps all.

Bang!

Bang!

Two more deafening reports shook the air and reverberated far and near among the woods.

"Steady, all!" cried Jesse James. "Back to the houses."

The banditti, which had been scattered about the village, now grasped guns and revolvers and began to return the fire.

The sharp crack of rifles and pistols heard in the woods drew nearer and nearer, as the guards left in the woods were driven in.

"Come, Luke, there is not a second to lose," cried Jesse James. "Back to the houses, as you value your life and the life of the girl."

Those men who were advancing, firing on the outlaws, were officers of the law.

Luke realized this in a moment, and knew full well that they were doing their duty. Their duty; indeed, was it not his own duty to do what he could to bring the violators of the law to justice? But Blanche Travers was there, and he determined to go with her.

Jesse James and his Missouri tigers would take her with them. They were fighting like lions, and easily succeeded in keeping Timberlake and his posse of men back.

"Get ready for retreat!" the voice of the giant bandit could be heard commanding to his men.

The sheriff's deputies had taken up their position behind trees, and were firing as rapidly as they could load their guns and pistols.

"Luke!" cried Jesse to Luke Miller, who had mechanically followed along by the side of the bandit chief, without making any effort to assist in repelling the attack.

"What, Jesse?" Luke asked.

"Can't you bring her off?"

"Blanche?"

"Yes."

"I think I can."

"Do so then."

He ran to the house in which Blanche Travers was sitting too much horrified at the sounds of conflict all about her to make any effort to fly.

"Blanche, Blanche!" he called.

"Luke, what is it?" she asked.

"The James Boys are attacked by Timberlake and now is our time to fly."

"Do you mean the sheriff?"

"Yes."

"Then let us go to him."

Luke Miller felt a wild desire to follow her advice and rush to the sheriff and his posse for protection but he checked the impulse. He remembered that he too was an outlaw, and that if he fell into the hands of the sheriff he would be hung for a crime of which he was innocent. Besides he had linked himself to the cause of the James Boys, he was now one of their band and he said:

"We will get away from all of them if we can. Come, Blanche, there isn't a moment to lose."

CHAPTER XII.

JESSE'S THREATS.

LUKE MILLER took the hand of the young prisoner and led her from the house by a door opposite the side from whence the attack had been made. The fight was now raging hot.

The bandits were mounting their horses and pouring in shot after shot from their revolvers.

"Come, Blanche, can you run?" said Luke.

"Yes."

"This way."

He led her into a narrow path through the dense wood.

"Luke, Luke, we are running away from them," she cried.

"I know it."

"Why not go to the sheriff, Timberlake? We will be safe with him."

"No, we won't."

"Why?"

"I can't explain now, Blanche, but we must escape from all of them."

She made no answer.

They ran on and on, deeper and deeper into the woods, until the sounds of flight and conflict were lost.

Luke was ever careful of his companion, and seeing that she was exhausted he said:

"Here, Blanche, let us rest. Sit on this log."

When both had sat down and she had been given a few moments to recover she said:

"Luke, I don't understand you."

"Why?"

"You act so strange."

Luke hung his head.

"Dare he tell her all. After a few moments he said:

"Do I seem strange?"

"Very."

"In what way?"

"We could have joined Timberlake's deputies but you would not."

"I dared not."

"Why?"

"Blanche, I am going to tell you the truth."

"What, Luke, are you going to confess to a crime?"

"No—no, I have been guilty of no crime."

"Then what do you mean, Luke?"

"You remember my uncle who reared me?"

"Yes."

"We quarreled about you. I told him that you and I were to be married. He hated your Uncle Samuel Franey, and hating him hated every blood relation of his, and swore if I married you he would disinherit me. I said I would wade through blood waist deep to accomplish my ends. He was going next day to the village to disinherit me, and that night—"

Luke stopped short, and burying his face in his hands as the recollection of the awful event came to his mind and shuddered.

"What happened that night?" she asked.

"He was murdered."

"Who, your uncle?"

"Yes, he was murdered and my knife found at his side."

"How came it there?"

"I don't know."

"But surely no one would ever accuse you of such a deed."

"They did. A warrant was issued for my arrest, and I fled. I am still flying from it, for if arrested I would be hung for a crime I never committed. They had almost caught me once, and but for Jesse James would have done so. He saved my life, and I—I joined them."

Blanche was so shocked at this intelligence that for several moments she could scarce speak.

As soon as she could regain her speech she said:

"Let us go away off where no one has ever heard of us, and under new names begin life anew."

"It is the best we can do."

"Come, let us go."

"Are you rested?"

"Yes."

"Both rose to their feet and started through the woods."

They had nothing save the declining sun to guide them.

At last they came to a creek and were following its banks when they came suddenly upon a man sitting on a stone fishing.

His slouch hat, lean form and ragged clothes, as well as sun browned hair and beard, were quite familiar to Luke Miller.

"Who is he?" asked Blanche, in a whisper.

"The champion liar of Missouri."

"Do you know his name?"

"He calls himself Tom Briggs, but he has become such a liar that one does not know whether to believe him or not."

They watched him for a moment.

A basket was at his side and he was baiting his hook. He had pulled out half a dozen brook trout and even as they looked he hauled in another and flung it in his basket.

"That was a fine fellow," said Luke, in a whisper. "He must enjoy his sport very much."

The fisherman again baited his hook, threw it in the water and sat silently watching the cork, as it bobbed up and down on the wavelets.

"Come," whispered Blanche. "Let us go away from him. For some reason I fear that man."

They left the creek and wandered through the woods until darkness had gathered over the earth.

Then they saw the lights of a camp fire in the distance ahead of them. Luke suggested that they go forward a little and reconnoiter.

"Won't there be danger?" she asked.

"No."

"They might be the James Boys."

"We will get near enough to see."

"If it should ever be the sheriff and his deputies you would be in more danger than if it was Jesse James."

"But if it should prove to be a party of movers they might take you to friends in safety," suggested Luke Miller.

"And leave you in peril?"

"I must not drag you down with me," he said. "My troubles and perils are my own. You must not share them with me."

"Luke, Luke, be careful! If you are captured it is death—if I am it only means captivity."

Luke and the girl crept forward a little nearer.

Halting every few rods they tried to make out the number of men about the camp fires, but found it utterly impossible to do so owing to the dense foliage of the trees.

"Stop, Luke," she whispered at last. "We are too close now. Let us not go any further."

"Can't make them out yet."

"But you will surely be discovered if you go nearer."

"Do you stay here, and I will go forward. There, hide behind that tree."

"No, let me go with you."

"You would be a hindrance to me," said Luke.

"Do as I request and it will all be right."

"Where shall I hide?"

"Here is an oak with the branches so near the ground that you can climb to the top without any trouble whatever."

He assisted her up to the first branches, and then she climbed up until she was concealed by the thick branches and leaves.

He then crept silently and cautiously forward. Slowly, step by step, he advanced, pushing the bushes aside with his hands so carefully as to make no noise.

An experienced scout could not have advanced with greater caution than did Luke Miller.

He at last gained a tree from behind which he could see everything about the camp.

Here he crouched down at the root and tried to make out the faces of the men about the camp, but it was impossible, as their backs were toward him.

"Confound my ill luck," the youth said, as he began to move away to the right. "I will get in some position so I can see their faces, if possible."

"Stop."

A hand was laid on his shoulder.

It was a firm, determined grasp, and instinctively felt that the hand was the grasp of but one man.

Only one man could have produced such a thrill of awe and dread, such a terrible cold electric thrill as did this hand.

The hand seemed heavy as lead and to possess the cold cailliness of death.

"Stop, don't go any further."

If there was any doubt of the grasp and touch, there was none in the voice.

The speaker was Jesse James, the bandit king of America. For a single instant Luke Miller felt a wild desire to snatch his revolver from its belt and shoot the bandit dead.

But the oily click, click, of a revolver lock at his side bore evidence to his ears that such a thing would be utterly impossible.

"Don't allow your thoughts to run in that direction," Jesse James said with a laugh, "for in common western parlance I have got the drop on you at a decided advantage."

"Jesse James?"

"Yes."

"Who are those men?"

"At the camp fire."

"Yes."

"Our friends."

"Our friends?"

"I emphatically said our friends, and by the term our friends I meant your friends as well as mine. Now, what have you to fear?"

"Nothing."

"Have you nothing to fear?"

"Well, I see that you hold a cocked revolver in your hand, but if we are friends you surely can't be threatening me with it."

Jesse James laughed a low, quiet chuckle.

"Luke Miller, you are a clever boy."

"Thank you for the compliment."

"Oh, no thanks at all. I say, Luke, we understand each other pretty well, don't we?" said Jesse.

"Yes. I flatter myself that we do."

"Where is she, Luke?"

"You mean Miss Blanche Travers?"

"Yes."

"Concealed."

"Where?"

"In the woods."

"You must bring her here."

"To be again your prisoner?"

"To be again my guest."

"Jesse James," said Luke Miller, his eyes flashing wild with determination, "I became one of your band. I ruined my own honor and soul at your bidding, but I will not give that poor girl up to you to be your prisoner."

"You will do it or die!" hissed Jesse James, leveling his cocked revolver at the breast of Luke Miller.

CHAPTER XIII.

ESCAPE—FLIGHT—RETURN.

"Shoot, Jesse James. I would rather die than betray that girl into your power."

"Luke."

"Well."

"I dislike to kill you."

"You had as well fire if you expect me to reveal where Blanche is hiding."

Jesse James put a whistle to his lips and blew a soft blast.

In a moment those dark, grim men about the camp-fire arose from their seats and hurried to where Jesse James and Luke stood.

Luke's face was pale as death.

"Hold up the lantern, boys," said Jesse James. "I want to see if he will flinch."

"Who have you, Jess?"

"A detective?" asked another.

"No."

"Who?"

"It's Luke."

"What are you going to do?"

"Shoot him."

"What for?"

"He has secreted the girl, Blanche Travers, and will not tell where she is hiding."

"Luke, Luke!" cried Frank James, "tell him where she is."

"Yes, tell him," cried Jim Cummins, in a voice loud enough to be heard a quarter of a mile away. "Tell him where the girl is, Luke Miller, and save your life."

"If you don't tell me where Blanche Travers is, I will shoot you."

All this loud talking was done for a purpose and it had the desired effect.

The threat reached the ear of Blanche at her place of concealment and she came running forward to where Luke and the outlaws were.

"Here I am, here I am!" she cried. "Spare his life."

"Oho, I thought this would bring you," cried Jesse.

"Spare him, please to spare him!"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" roared the bandit king laughing until the forest resounded with echoes. "I never had any thought of killing him, Blanche. We only wanted to bring you out of the brush, and now that you are here we want to assure you and Luke both that we are your friends, but that we can't trust you to leave us."

"Give us our liberty," cried Blanche.

"Not yet. All in good time."

Luke was then told he was still to consider himself one of their number and was not to be guarded, but allowed to go wherever he pleased.

When they reached the camp he learned that they were on their way to another stronghold in the great dense forest in Clay county.

Luke determined to escape with Blanche at the first opportunity.

They went that night to their stronghold.

It was simply a great log house owned by a man named Hite, and the father of Wood Hite, one of the banditti.

"Here we will all be safe, and we will have a good, long rest," said Jesse James.

"We need it," Bill Chadwell answered.

Luke managed to get an opportunity to speak with Blanche on the day of their arrival, and whispered in her ear:

"Don't despair."

"Is there any hope?"

"Yes."

"Can we get away?"

"We can. My horse is out in the stable. When next we go it will be on horseback."

Luke Miller had not abandoned the hope of escape, and Blanche Travers, who had had no confidence in the assurances of Jesse James of friendship, was eager to escape.

"He has some object in view by this imprisonment," she thought. "His pledge is false, unless he has pledged himself to kill me."

One night, about a week after their arrival at this place, there came a light tap on her door.

She rose, and going to the door, asked:

"Who is there?"

"It is I," whispered Luke.

"Luke Miller?"

"Yes, open the door and let me in."

She quickly opened the door, and entering, he whispered:

"Blanche, we can escape."

"Is Jesse here?"

"No, he rode away two hours ago with most of the men. The way is clear. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Come on."

Then they stole away from the house.

Mr. and Mrs. Hite were in another part of the house and did not notice their escape. Then they stole away into the darkness.

They concealed themselves behind a cluster of bushes until Wood Hite and another of the band went by. They were talking in a low, earnest tone, and when they had gone by Luke said:

"They don't suspect us of having any design of escape."

"My heart stood still and I could scarcely breathe as they went by."

"Let us go on," said Luke.

It was so dark that they were forced to grope their way along. He took her hand in his and led her, but despite all their precaution they collided with an occasional tree or stumbled over a stone.

At last she heard a horse snort, and he said:

"Here are the horses."

"How many have you?" she asked.

"Two."

They mounted and rode silently through the wood for a long distance. At last the moon rose above the tree-tops and lighted the scene all about them. The forest was aglow with beauty.

They entered a road and traveled until morning. At sunrise they halted at a farm-house for rest and refreshments. They had not finished breakfast when they heard the tramp of horses' feet on the road, and on looking out, Blanche gave utterance to a cry of joy.

"Uncle Samuel, Uncle Samuel!"

She started toward the door and Luke fearing some harm might befall her hurried to her side.

"There they are—there are the outlaws. Shoot them down!" roared Mr. Franey.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang! rang out a half a dozen guns and pistols.

The bullets whizzed into the door causing the farmer and his wife and children to give utterance to yells of fear and dread, and run away to seek shelter under the house.

"Hold!" cried Luke. "Don't shoot her."

"Kill 'em both!" cried Franey.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

The balls whizzed like leaden hail all about them, and Luke once more shouted:

"Hold—hold! don't fire any more."

"Kill them both."

"Crack."

"If another shot is fired you may look out for me."

"Never mind him. Both are outlaws. Down with them!" roared Sam Franey.

"Bang!" went his pistol.

The bullet left a blue streak on the pale cheek of Blanche.

Luke Miller was now almost beside himself with fury. He hastily whipped out his revolver and a stunning report shook the air.

Sam Franey uttered a yell of rage and pain and fell forward upon the neck of his horse.

"What have you done!" she asked.

"I shot to kill!" he answered.

Down the road like a flock of frightened sheep fled the followers of Franey. His horse turned about and followed them, with the rider wounded and bleeding, but much worse frightened than hurt following them.

"Come, Blanche, come—we have not a moment to lose," he whispered, as he turned about, seized her arm and hurried her to her horse.

Dazed, bewildered and horrified at what had happened, she suffered herself to be assisted into the saddle, and he mounting his own horse they galloped up the lane.

"Luke, Luke, did you kill him?" she asked, her face as pale as death.

"I don't know."

"This is terrible."

"It was a clear case of self-defense and defense of you, too," he answered.

"Of me?"

"Yes, he was shooting at you."

"Why did he fire at me?"

"Because he wanted to kill you," Luke answered.

"Wanted to kill me and he my uncle. Oh! Luke, it can't be he wanted to kill me!"

"He did."

"Why?"

"Because what Jesse James said about him must be true."

"True. How can I believe it?"

"Blanche, was he ever your favorite uncle?"

"No."

"Did he ever love you as an uncle should an orphan niece?"

"No."

"Hasn't he always seemed to hate you?"

"Yes, I have thought so."

"Then Jesse James was correct."

"Is it possible?"

"It is true."

"Then do you mean to say that Jesse James is our friend?"

"Everything seems to indicate that he is."

"I can hardly believe it."

"We must admit all the facts," said Luke.

A wild yell was heard in their rear at this moment, and looking back they saw a dozen horsemen coming after them with yells and shouts of vengeance.

"Ah! he is not badly wounded," cried Luke.

"Who?"

"Your uncle. See he rides at the head of the cavalcade, and will soon be within pistol shot."

"I believe our horses can outrun theirs."

"They can."

"Let us run away then, Luke, I don't want to fight with them. Keep from shedding blood, if possible."

It's a common expression among sailors that a stern chase is a long one. The term may be applied to land chases as well as to the ocean.

Three hours of flight, and though the distance between pursuers and pursued had greatly increased, the pursuers were still in sight and pressing on after them with wonderful determination and tenacity.

"How are we to shake them off?" said Luke to himself.

His own horse, a gallant steed, seemed to show but little signs of exhaustion, but he knew only too well that he could not long withstand the strain of that terrible flight.

The horse which Blanche rode not being possessed of such wonderful powers of endurance, had begun to show signs of exhaustion.

He continued to lag behind, and it required almost continual whipping for him to keep up with Luke's horse.

"Blanche, we will have to fight!" he said.

"Oh, no, please don't."

"We must fight or surrender, and surrender means death."

"A little longer let us try to escape. See there—there is a heavy forest and perhaps if we were once to get in it we would be safe. We could hide from them."

"He may be good for an hour or two more," Luke reflectively remarked, gazing at her horse, "but not for longer."

As they were entering the heavy wood alluded to, Luke cast a glance behind them and saw that their pursuers were nearer.

"We can't long keep out of their clutches," he thought.

At this moment a wild yell burst from the woods on their left.

Then like a thunderbolt a dozen horsemen dashed out of the wood. Every one wore a black mask over his face, and carried the rein in his teeth and a revolver in each hand.

Down upon the pursuers like avenging Nemesis, they poured, shouting, yelling and pouring in a constant volley of shots. They saw their late pursuers scattered like chaff before a whirlwind.

"Who are they, Luke?"

"The James Boys."

"Then our fate's sealed."

"Never fear, I will defend you to the last," he cried.

Having scattered the pursuers, the banditti, with Jesse James at their head, galloped toward the fugitives.

"It's no use to try to escape from them," said Luke Miller, wheeling his horse about so as to face the oncoming James Boys.

He held his pistol ready cocked in his hand, and advanced his horse a few steps so as to be between the James Boys and Blanche.

"Do you want to go back with us?" asked Jesse.

Luke was amazed.

There was not the least sign of anger on the face of Jesse James.

Luke was too much astonished to make any answer.

"What does he mean?" Luke thought. "Jesse James is not a forgiving man. He never forgives any one."

"You are now convinced that we are your friends," said Jesse James, "and that we are all the friends you have. I have again saved your lives. Will you go with us, or do you prefer to try the cold and cruel world again? You can have your choice."

"Jesse James, I am almost constrained to believe what you say."

"Have you met Sam Franey?"

"Yes."

"Do you now believe that he is your friend and the friend of Miss Travers?"

"No, he is not. He tried to kill both of us."

"I have you in my power and have never attempted to harm either of you. You will both be assassinated if you leave us, and now you have your choices. Go with us or stay to be hunted like hares."

Luke Miller returned his revolver to his belt and went back to Blanche. For a few moments they conversed in undertones, and then Luke waved his hand and said:

"We will go with you."

"Then we will return."

"Where?"

"To the Hite house in the wood; we will be safer there than anywhere else."

And then the entire cavalcade wheeled around and returned to the Hite house, which was not reached until long past midnight.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE WAVE.

SEVERAL days passed quietly at the Hite house without any event worthy of mention.

Every member of the band was in, but all laid low and seldom was any one save old man Hite and the sentries in disguise to be seen.

The sentries, usually disguised as wood cutters or hunters, were to be seen almost continually wandering around the house through the woods. Never far away and yet seeming to have no connection whatever with the house.

One day a sentry came in and told Jesse:

"I don't like the appearance of things down the creek, Jess."

"Why, Bill?"

"I ran on two fellows down there who were engaged in a close confab."

"Down under the hill?"

"Yes."

"Strangers?"

"Yes."

"How long since you saw them?"

"I just came from them."

Jesse James rose to his feet and began tightening his revolver belt.

"What are you going to do, Jess?"

"I don't know yet. It all depends on circumstances. The chances are I will put a pair of bullets through those fellows."

No one interposed any objection.

Jesse left the house and stole away down the ravine toward the creek.

He had not gone far before he discovered a form flitting about in the woods.

"A detective."

Jesse James sank on his knee and cocked his revolver.

He lay down.

Then he proceeded to crawl along the grassy path, his cocked pistol in his hand, until he reached a log lying right across the path.

Here he came to a halt and lay down with his cocked pistol ready.

The bandit king realized, of course, the danger of getting a bullet.

Those western deputies under Timberlake were as skilled as Indian scouts. Many of them had Winchester rifles and a glimpse of Jesse's head above the log was enough to warrant a bullet through it.

Jesse heard a man on the other side of the log.

"Now, my good fellow, I will perforate you with a shot if you don't look a little out."

Suddenly he saw something rise up before him. It was a head, or at least he saw the crown of a hat, and his revolver was aimed at it when he heard a low, chuckling laugh on the other side of the log, and the hat fell to the ground.

"Jim—Jim Cummins!" Jesse called in a whisper.

"Well, Jess."

"What are you doing?"

"Playing."

"Playing with death, old fellow. You must look out."

"I am."

"You came near getting a bullet."

"Through my hat."

"No, through your head."

"Well, a miss is as good as a mile, Jess."

"Yes, but don't let this occur again."

"Where are you going?"

"Haven't you heard of them, Jim Cummins?"

"Of who?"

"Of the two men—strangers."

"No?"

"Detectives."

"Where are they?"

"Holding a consultation down on the creek bank."

"Why, Jess?"

"Bill Chadwell told me."

"Well, Bill Chadwell knows."

"Yes."

Then came a silence, broken by Jesse saying: "Jim Cummins, reconnoiter from your position."

"Well."

"Do you see any one?"

"No."

"Then I'll come over."

"What are you going to do with them, Jesse?"

"If they are detectives I will kill them."

"Let me go with you, Jess."

"You may."

"All right—I am ready to do up one of them."

"Come on, Jim, but be careful—be very careful."

"I will."

Down the bank they crept.

Each held a cocked pistol in his hand.

"Jim," whispered Jesse James, coming to a standstill just on the opposite side of the big howler of stone, on the other side of which the two supposed detectives had been engaged in a consultation.

"Well, Jesse?"

"They were right over on the other side of that rock."

"Are they?"

"Yes."

"Well, how will we take them by surprise?"

"One of us must climb over the howler, and one go around it."

"I will go over it."

"Then I will go around the left side of it, and now, Jim."

"Yes."

"You take the man on the right, and I will drop the fellow on the left."

"All right."

Then Jim Cummins began clumping slowly

and cautiously upon the top of the great stone, and Jesse crept slowly and cautiously around it. But no one was to be seen.

They met and gazed at each other in amazement.

"Jim."

"Jesse."

"They are gone."

"Yes."

"Do you see their tracks?"

After looking about for a few moments he answered:

"Yes."

"Let us follow the trail."

"Agreed."

Slowly down the banks of the creek the two men wended their way until they came to a place where a skiff had been drawn into shore.

The skiff was gone and the footprints had likewise disappeared.

"Jim."

"Yes."

"They have gone off in a skiff on the creek and down into the Missouri river."

"That's about it."

Then came another short silence, and Jim asked:

"What are we going to do next?"

"Follow them."

"Where?"

"Into the Missouri river."

"How?"

"Run up the creek and get the skiff."

Jim, who was anxious to pursue them on the water, hurriedly ran up to where the boat was moored, and shoving it off into the creek seized the oars and pulled down the stream to where Jesse James awaited him on the bank.

His tall form was indistinctly outlined, and Jim called out to him.

"Aye, aye!" Jesse answered.

"Is that you, Jesse?"

"Yes; pull in quick," Jesse answered.

Jim Cummins plied his oars and the skiff glided into shore.

"Here we are, Jesse. Come aboard quickly."

Jesse James leaped lightly into the skiff and was pulled out into the creek.

It was not far to the Missouri river, and they were soon gliding into the turbid stream.

The current was swift and the wind blew a gale.

The small boat tossed like a feather on the waves.

"Which way shall we head, Jesse?" Jim Cummins asked.

"Down stream, I suppose, though we really don't know which way to go."

"No."

"Go down stream."

And with only a faint hope of overhauling the two spies they rowed down the stream.

CHAPTER XV.

FRIENDS.

For a long time Jim rowed in silence, and Jesse James sat in the stern of the little boat holding a cocked revolver in his hand.

Then Jim spoke.

"Jesse."

"Well, Jim?"

"Can you see anything?"

"Nothing but the water and darkness."

"Perhaps they have not come this way."

"They may not have come," said Jesse, "but we don't know where else to look."

"That's so."

"Perhaps they were not spies. They might have been friends."

"No, it couldn't have been, for all our fellows save those who were guards and sentries were all counted."

Jim Cummins said no more, but continued to pull away at his oars.

Suddenly a noise was heard on their right.

"Hold up, Jim," Jesse whispered.

"Did you hear that?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"The dip of an oar."

"Go easy."

Slowly they glided down the current, which was somewhat sluggish.

Jesse James raised his cocked revolver and pointed it in the direction of the sound.

At this moment there came an exclamation from the darkness.

Jesse started.

A voice coming out of the darkness said:

"Look out there or we'll capsize."

"Steady on the larboard."

Bang! went Jesse's pistol. The blinding flash

and stunning report was so sudden as to completely startle Jim Cummins.

"Jess! Jess—"

"Hush, Jim."

"Why did you shoot?"

"It was an accident!" Jesse cried. "I swear it was an accident."

Bang!

Bang!

Came two stunning reports from the darkness and the buckshot whistled like hail about the bandits.

"Jess!"

"Are you hurt, Jim?"

"No, are you?"

"No."

"They've got double-barreled shot guns."

"I know it."

"We had better look sharp, or the first thing we know we will be riddled with bullets."

Jim Cummins dipped the oars in the water and gave the boat a swift dart to one side.

This one stroke placed the boat out of range.

Jesse James fired two more shots in the darkness, and Jim Cummins again placed the boat in a different place.

"Hold a moment," Jesse James whispered.

Jim rested on his oars, but ready to plunge the thin blades in the water and send the boat skimming out of range.

There was quite a lengthy silence, then faint murmurs could be heard on the darkness.

"Who is it, anyway?" they finally made out a voice.

"I don't know."

"Did they hit you?"

"No, but it came near."

"They shot well in the dark."

"You bet."

"Drift along."

"They may be drifting too."

"But the chances are we will separate before daylight."

Jesse James heard the above short dialogue, and now no longer felt a doubt as to who it was.

"Jim," he whispered, in a voice so faint that even Jim's keen ear could scarce hear him.

"Well, Jesse."

"Can't you pull slowly in toward them?"

"I can try."

"Don't let them know it. We want to take them by surprise."

"I am not quite sure of their direction."

"Bear in toward land."

"There is land on both sides on our right, but your left as you sit backwards."

"All right."

"Are you quite sure of the direction now?" Jesse James asked, as he waited with a cocked revolver in each hand.

"Yes."

"Go on."

"All right."

Slowly but steadily they rowed.

Jesse James was now eager and excited.

His eyes glared through the darkness, and he kept a cocked revolver in each hand.

"Steady, Jim, steady."

Jim gave utterance to a carefully whispered, "Ay, ay!"

At Jim's side lay his trusty revolver on the seat.

He was ready the moment they came upon the enemy to drop the oars and with cocked pistol to grapple with them.

But they met no foe.

On, on and on they glided.

The intense darkness, like some mighty pall all about them, seemed to part as they advanced and let them pass on to the shore.

Nor did they dream of their near proximity to shore.

Jim Cummins grew momentarily more anxious to get at the invisible foe, and dipping his oars deep into the water, gave two or three long strong pulls.

The boat shot forward and next moment its prow could be heard grating upon the sands. In fact it leaped half the way out of the water upon the beach.

"Jim."

"Jess."

"What have you done?"

"Beached the boat."

"And we have completely missed them?"

"Yes."

"How did we do it?"

"I don't know."

They waited for several moments and listened.

Jesse James, who disliked above all things to be outgeneraled, felt his chargin' most keenly, imagined that he could hear the foes whom they had missed in the darkness, chuckling and laughing in the darkness.

So strong was this belief in him that he cocked his pistol and once or twice could scarce be restrained from firing.

"Don't shoot, Jesse," said Jim Cummins.

"Don't you hear them?"

"Directly out there in the river."

"No."

"I am quite sure I hear them laughing at us."

"It is only the gurgling of the water in the current as it ripples by," said Jim.

"Perhaps you are right."

Then came a long silence during which the croaking of frogs and rippling of waters not far off was all that Jesse James heard.

"Jim."

"Well, Jesse."

"I am just thinking what a fool a fellow can make of himself when in a passion."

"The moral of it is you should never get in a passion."

"You are right, Jim, and yet we will all fly into a pet sometimes."

"That's so."

"Now if we had used cool judgment instead of blind fury we could have run onto those spies. But as it is they have eluded us."

"It seems so."

"Well, Jim, there is no use of waiting here any longer."

"I think not."

"Let us launch our boat and pull up the stream."

"I am ready. Sit astern. So here goes."

Jim Cummins got well in the stern of the boat himself, and placing an oar in the sand pushed with all his might and it soon set the boat afloat.

Then they glided out into the stream.

Jim sat down to the oars, and they sped along at an easy rate of speed.

Both kept their eyes and ears wide open.

It was a little lighter than before, for the breeze had blown away the fog which had settled over the face of the water.

Jesse James was determined if he came upon the strange boat again that it should not escape him.

No sound, save the measured dip of Jim's oars, could be heard. Their position was not an enviable one by any means. At any moment they might be riddled with bullets.

Jesse James was not insensible to their danger.

Then if those men were spies set on their trails, and had seen their stronghold at the Hite house they would, in all probability, return ere long in overwhelming numbers.

"Jesse," said Jim Cummins.

Jim had had something on his mind all evening, and had been half a dozen times on the eve of telling it to Jesse, but every time had been interrupted.

"What, Jim?"

"Do you think our new pal is all right?"

"Who—do you mean Luke Miller?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. Have you any cause to doubt him, Jim?"

"N-no, not since he tried to run away."

"Well, wasn't that all very natural?"

"I—I suppose so."

"I hope he is all right, but yet you might keep an eye on him, Jim."

"Just exactly what I am going to do, Jesse. I will never let him get from under my closest scrutiny."

They were again silent while Jim pulled slowly up the stream.

Suddenly Jesse cried:

"What is that?"

"Where?"

"In the water. See."

"It looks like a head."

The object was a large, dark, round object, and the bandit saw it floating toward him on the water, bobbing up and down on the waves.

"Don't you see it, don't you see it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Here goes."

"Bang!"

There came a slight crash after the report, and the object was smashed all to pieces by the bullet and disappeared.

As soon as the echoes of the shot had died away, a voice that was not unfamiliar to Jesse called out from the darkness:

"Say, er mistur, don't yer think yer doin' er feller er pesky mean kind uv er trick anyway, ter be er smashin' uv my jug?"

"Who are you?" cried Jesse James, in some amazement.

"I am Tom Briggs, better known ez ther Champion Liar uv Missouri."

"What are you doing here?"

"Juggin'."

"Juggin'?" cried Jesse.

"Yes, juggin'."

"What do you mean by juggin'?"

"I jist mean thet I am ketchin' fish with jugs, thet air all."

"Catching fish with jugs! Well, I can believe now that you are either the champion liar or fool of Missouri, I can't say which."

"Now jist yer hold on er leetle bit, pilgrim, an' don't yer go ter blowin' off yer bazoo afore yer know jist what yer talkin' erbout. Juggin' air er very common amusement ermong we Missourians ez iove ther piscertorial art. Ter jug one takes half er dozen ur more jugs, stop 'em up with corks, an' then tie er hook an' line erbout ther jug handle an' drop 'em all in ther river. Then ez they float down ther river, why ther jugger floats erlong in ther boat er watchin' 'em, an' when one bobs down, he knows he air got er blamed big fish. Now we air friends, an' it war a blamed shabby trick yer done me, now ain't it?"

CHAPTER XVI.

AND HE WINKED THE OTHER EYE.

FROM the first time he had met with this strange individual calling himself Tom Briggs, the champion liar of Missouri, Jesse James had been completely mystified by him. He had in his life met many curious characters, but never had he seen one the equal of Tom Briggs.

"I didn't know it was your jug when I put a bullet through it," said Jesse James.

"Wall, ef yer didn't know et, why et air all right, podner."

"You have come a long way to fish, haven't you?"

"Not very, podner. Yer see I jist live right up the river."

"How far?"

"Erbout fifteen miles I reckon, may be more or less, I dun know, seein' ez I've never hed it measured."

"Well, isn't fifteen miles a long distance to go juggin'?"

"No. Shaw, yer don't know nuthin' erbout juggin', do yer?"

"No."

"Why, we sometimes jug fur twenty-five miles up an' down the river."

"Do you often come down this far?"

"No."

"You have been here before?"

"Yes. Say mistur, didjer hayar a terrible racket down ther river."

"What was it like?"

"Shootin'!"

"Shooting. Yes, I did hear shooting. Do you know who was down the river?"

"No."

"Do your acquaintances often come down this far?"

"No, not ez I know on."

"Perhaps it was some of them."

"Gness not. What yer reckon they war er shootin' at."

"Ducks, perhaps," Jesse answered.

"Ducks, creashun, podner, d'yer know nothin' erbout ducks? Don't yer know thet ducks don't fly uv er night?"

"But they swim."

"People don't hunt 'em up er night."

"It might be deer."

"Or, it mought er been fellers er goin' home an' they mought er been shootin' off their guns. We don't know what it war."

"Whar are you going now," Jesse James asked.

"I er goin' on down ther river er watchin' uv my jugs."

At this moment there came a land splash in the water but a few rods to their left.

"Er cat-fish, er cat-fish!" cried Tom Briggs. Then he lighted a torch, and held it out over the water and gazed far and near.

Jesse James and Jim Cummins now both entered into the spirit of the sport.

The jug was jerked completely under the water disappearing for several moments. Finally it came to the surface several rods down the stream.

"There it is—there it is!" cried Jim Cummins, who had the sporting instinct very strong within him. In a few moments both of the boats were in hot pursuit of the jug.

They had almost reached it when it again glided over the surface of the water impelled by a powerful fish in the water beneath and finally disappeared beneath the waves.

Then came another period of watching.

At last it appeared so near to the skiff in

which Jim Cummins and Jesse James sat, that Jim dropped his oars and leaning forward seized the jug.

But he knew little of juggling for catfish, or he would never have attempted such a plan.

Down went the jug as if impelled by a forty horse power, and he was jerked from the skiff several feet down into the water ere he knew it.

He released the jug and came to the surface strangled and almost half drowned.

Jesse James seized him by the shoulders and pulled him into the skiff.

"Jim, don't try it again," said Jesse.

"I believe I won't," Jim answered, the water streaming from his thoroughly soaked clothes.

"Thar it air," cried Tom Briggs, and again he pulled away after the jug.

The fisherman seemed to understand his business, for he allowed the fish to worry itself until it was almost exhausted and then he pulled the jug in.

"Ef yer fellers 'll help me, I'll pull 'im in ashore. Gosh, I tell yer it air er big catfish. It air er regl'ar whale."

Jesse James and Jim Cummins both possessed enough of the hunter's instinct to take a great pleasure in fish catching. They pulled the fish into shore, and it proved to be a monster, weighing almost one hundred and fifty pounds.

Much larger catfish have been found in the Missouri river.

"Now, friends, you have been so good ter me," said Tom Briggs, "I'll go hum with yer, an' we'll skin ther fish an' give yer half av it."

"Oh, no, no, no," said Jesse. "We couldn't ask you to do that."

"Wall, I will give yer a mess anyway."

"Oh, no, we live too far."

"Wall, lemme send yer a mess by my boy. Jist tell me where yer live, won't yer, an' I'll send it."

"We can't permit that, it would be too far."

"Wall, let's cut off some o' ther fish right hyar fur yer."

But Jesse and Jim protested against that and insisted on putting the fish in the skiff of the fisherman. Then they helped him gather up his jugs, and he pulled away up the stream.

Jesse and Jim Cummins remained behind, watching the boatman as he rowed away.

"Jim."

"Well, Jesse."

"What do you think of him now?"

"I don't know."

The question and answer were heard by the fisherman as he rowed up the stream, and he winked the other eye.

What did that wink mean?

He was too far away for either Jesse James or Jim Cummins to see him. Had they seen that wink it might have created uneasy suspicions in their minds.

Jesse James was naturally a very suspicious man, but in Tom Briggs, the champion liar of Missouri, he saw nothing that could arouse his suspicion.

If he was acting a part, Briggs had played it to perfection.

Jesse James and Jim returned to the Hite house, where they found the band all wild with anxiety at their prolonged stay.

"Where have you been, Jesse?" his brother Frank asked.

"Searching for those spies."

"Did you find them?"

"Yes."

"Bring them in."

"No."

"Sink 'em?"

"No."

"What then have you done with them?" the brother of the bandit king asked.

"Nothing—they got away."

"Jesse, do you mean you let them get away?"

"I mean we failed to catch them."

Then he proceeded to tell Frank all about the adventures of the night, not failing to mention their meeting with the fisherman.

"What do you think of him, Jesse?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think he is all right?"

Jesse James was silent for a moment, and said:

"I am somewhat divided in my opinion about that fellow. Sometimes I think he is all right, and the next moment I seriously doubt it."

"Why don't you kill him?"

"Well, I don't know. When I have made up my mind to do the deed, the next think I know I find him so innocent and so unassuming and good-hearted I can't."

"Well, I will finish him if I can lay hands on him."

"Do it, Frank. You have little or no scruples

about killing a fellow and I have. I think you could kill your wife and children if it was to your advantage."

"And you may bet I would," Frank James answered. "There is nothing that is meanly-mouthed about me. When I strike I hit hard."

They redoubled the guard on that night in consequence of having met with the spies out in the woods and perhaps having met them on the river, but the night passed away peacefully and when morning came Jesse was early astir.

Luke Miller was the first person he met.

"Where are you going?" Luke asked, for Jesse was evidently arrayed for traveling.

"Do you want to go with me?" Jesse asked.

"I am growing rather tired of this inactivity," Luke answered.

"Come on then."

They saddled their horses and started up the road; Jesse instructing all his followers to keep a sharp look out for detectives and to be prepared for either flight or fight.

"Luke," said Jesse James when they were on the road, "I met that strange fellow again last night."

"Who do you mean—Briggs?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"On the river."

"What was he doing?"

"Fishing."

"Well, were your suspicions roused by him?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know."

"I swear I don't know."

"Well it is strange, Jesse James, that you haven't formed an opinion as to this fellow."

"Have you?"

"I don't hardly know—"

"Then you are in the same fix I am in."

"I believe he is only a simple minded sort of a fellow and that he wouldn't harm any one. Yet I don't know."

Jesse James was thoughtful for a few moments, and said:

"I don't like his being so often seen about ns. His excuses are very reasonable, and yet I would like it much beter if I did not see so much of him."

They had rode about six miles when they suddenly came upon a man driving a span of thin horses, whose hip bones seemed to be almost through their skins.

He had been to the woods, and had a load of wood in his old wagon which was in fact a very dilapidated affair.

Jesse James suddenly seized Luke's arm and whispered:

"Luke, I wish I may die if that isn't the very fellow we are talking about!"

"Tom Briggs?"

"Yes."

Jesse James involuntarily laid his hand on the butt of his revolver.

"Don't do it, Jesse!"

"Let us kill him and be over with it."

"Why?"

"I am afraid of him. He is such a suspicious-looking fellow."

"But, Jesse, there is nothing at all suspicious in a man hauling a load of wood."

"No."

"He looks the personification of innocence and ignorance."

They soon overtook the man on the wagon load of wood.

"Hello!" he cried.

"Good-morning," Jesse answered.

"Wall, yer ought ter a seed that air fish when I tuck 'im home. My wife an' one o' ther boys went with me an' we carried him ter the smoke house whar we hung him up an' skinned him. Sich a whopper. My wife a'most went inter fits over it. Say won't yer go over with me er cross ther hills an' take dinner? Then yer kin taste o' ther fish."

Jesse James thanked him, but he was on an urgent business matter now and could not think of going anywhere for dinner.

"Wall, ef yer won't, yer won't, I reckon. But yer welcome ter come any time yer want ter."

"Where do you live?" Jesse asked.

"Ercross ther hills."

He pointed away to the left.

"How far?"

"Wall, reckon it air five miles."

"Five miles? You have come a long distance for wood. Have you no wood nearer?"

"No—I got er beetle patch of timber clos ter my house, but it air young, yer see, an' I wan't ter save it."

"So you come out here, do you?"

"Yes."

"Well, we must be going. Come on, Luke."

Luke Miller and Jesse galloped away and the wood hauler jogged along on the top of the wagon load of wood. As they disappeared from sight, he gave another one of those significant winks which might have been fatal had Jesse James been near enough to have seen it.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MOMENT OF PERIL.

"HAVE you made up your opinion of him?" Luke Miller asked, as they galloped up the road.

"No."

"He can't be more than he pretends, an ignorant countryman."

Jesse James was silent for a short time, and said:

"It may be he is only playing the part of a shrewd detective. Detectives are always good actors."

"Yes, but I don't believe he is acting."

Jesse made no answer.

At noon they came to an old mill on the bank of a creek. It was a very old structure, having been built many years before the date of our story, but being made of solid lime stone was of course in a good condition.

The water which turned the mill was in the creek.

Jesse and Luke were both in disguise, and rode boldly to the stone mill.

"There are several men there, Jesse," said Luke.

"Yes—farmers come to the mill," Jesse answered.

They dismounted and mingled with the men. Jesse hoped to gain some intelligence from them about Timberlake.

"Wall, them air James Boys air er playin' er very high hand," one fellow was saying.

"Wot hev they done now?" Jesse James said.

"Done?"

"Yes."

"Hain't yer learn erbout it?"

"No."

"Wall, d'yer know Mistur Sam Franey?"

"No, I dun happen ter know 'im."

"Yer don't?"

"No."

"Wall, he's got a gal."

"She's his uiece Lige," put in another farmer.

"Wall, berlieve she is; it air all ther same, though, fur ther pint I'm ergoin' ter make."

"What's yer pint?" Jesse asked.

"She war er comin' home ter her uncle in ther stage coach when thar stage war stopped an' robbed an' she carried off by Jess hisself."

"Wall, that war awful."

"Then when Sam put ont with er lot o' fellers ter bring ther gal back one o' ther gang, a feller named Luke Miller, shot him an' a'most killed him."

"Did he?"

"Yes."

"That war awful."

Jesse James and Luke were in the upper part of the mill when they heard the clatter of horses' feet on the road.

"Luke!" Jesse whispered, "I believe we are betrayed."

"Why?"

"Look."

Eight horsemen were coming down the hill.

"Who are they?"

"That big fellow in the lead is Timberlake, the sheriff."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"Are they after ns?"

"Who else could they be after?"

At this moment Timberlake caught sight of Jesse James in the window of the mill and cried:

"There he is—there is Jesse James."

"He knows me in spite of this disguise," cried Jesse James.

"Yes," Luke gasped. "What must we do?"

"Fight."

Jesse drew a revolver and cried:

"Halt!"

"There they are, both of them," bawled Timberlake.

"Crack!" went the revolver of Jesse James.

The bullet sped so close to Timberlake's cheek as to wound him slightly.

The sheriff fell forward on the saddle and Luke gasped:

"You have killed him."

"I hope so."

"Oh, Jesse—"

"He is not dead, now down the stairway—quick!"

As they ran down the narrow winding stairway they were met by the miller, who cried:

"Hold!"

"Get out of the way," said Jesse.

"Not much. What does that shootin' mean?"

"Get out of the way! Stand aside, or it may be worse for you."

"I won't do it."

"Then take that."

Bang went Jesse's pistol.

The bullet passed through the crown of the miller's straw hat, knocking the hat completely off his head.

The fellow, believing that his head was shot from his shoulders with the hat, gave utterance to a wild yell and fell, and rolled to the bottom of the stairway. Alighting on his shoulders and head, he lay stunned and frightened almost out of his wits.

"Have you killed him, Jesse?" Luke cried.

"No, the fool is not hurt."

He would at any other time have enjoyed a good laugh at the expense of the miller, but now they had all they could do to take care of themselves.

On reaching the door of the mill, they saw the farmers who were gathered about the mill running as fast as they could to their horses and wagons.

"There come the deputies, Luke. Now is your chance."

"Bang!"

"Bang!"

"Bang!"

A volley of bullets rattled like hail against the stone wall and into the door in which Jesse James stood.

One ball cut off some splinters from the side of the door, and Jesse was slightly wounded by one of them.

He staggered back against the door sill and clutched at the wall.

"Jesse, Jesse, are you killed?"

"No."

"Wounded?"

"Only stunned. Fire at them. Keep them back a moment."

Luke Miller thrust his right hand, which held his revolver, out of the door and fired five or six shots as rapidly as he could shoot at the advancing deputies.

He took no aim, and did not look to see who was hit, or if he had wounded any one.

The sheriff's posse fell back before the fusillade from the pistol, and for a few moments there was a lull in the attack.

"Jesse, are you better?"

"Yes."

"Where are you wounded?"

He put his hand to the side of his head.

"It was a ball glancing from the door."

Luke now saw a blue spot about the size of a five-cent piece in silver on one side of his forehead.

But Jesse was recovering very rapidly, and he picked up his pistol which he had dropped and returned the shot.

One of Timberlake's men was wounded, and they were glad to retire to a still safer distance.

Jesse James was quick to see an advantage.

His eagle eye took in the situation at a glance, and with his face aflame with eagerness he cried:

"Luke, now is our time."

"What do you mean?"

"Come to horse."

"I am ready."

"Be prepared for a whirlwind of bullets. They will rain about us."

"I know it."

"One."

"Two."

"Three."

Away they went.

Leaping from the door as far out into the road as they could, they ran for life to their horses.

"There they go—there they go!" roared Timberlake. "Shoot them down! Let them have it!"

A volley of shots like a thunder clap rang out on the air, and bullets whizzed like hail all about them.

Jesse James limped.

"Are you hit again?"

"It's but a scratch, Luke."

Then a moment later he added:

"Go on, Luke, unfasten the horses and mount your own. Turn Siroc loose and he will come to me."

Jesse sank down behind a pile of stones at the roadside.

"He is worse hurt than he would have me believe," Luke thought.

He ran to the horses, and seizing the hitch rein of Siroc, gave it a jerk.

It was tied in a bow knot, and slipped the moment he pulled the halter.

"There, Siroc, you are free—go!"

The horse bounded away with a deafening neigh to his master.

Jesse James, crouching behind the pile of stones, was firing shots that told at the officers.

"I think they will not care to crowd us too close," Jesse said. "Oho, Siroc, my noble steed, now to mount you. Your master has fared badly in this skirmish."

Jesse rose to his feet, but he was quite lame. By a tremendous effort he vaulted in the saddle and seized the rein.

"Luke!" he cried, "are you mounted?"

"Not yet."

"Mount."

Luke Miller sprang into the saddle.

"Come with me. Follow."

Wheeling Siroc about, he galloped down past the mill so that the corner of the stone building shut him from view, and Luke following, they reached the bluff about eight feet above the water.

"Are you going to leap over the bluff?" cried Luke.

Turning his eagle eyes, flashing with fire, on his companion, Jesse James cried:

"Follow!"

There was not a moment's hesitation.

Jesse James touched Siroc's flank with his heel and the gallant steed leaped over the bluff and into the air, and came with a splash in the water.

Next moment there came another splash.

Luke Miller had joined him.

"Now we have them—now we have them!" yelled Timberlake, and with his men hard on his heels he pressed down to the bluff.

Timberlake blew a loud whistle.

It was answered by some one across the stream.

"Jess."

"Luke."

"We are headed off."

"I know it."

"Three men across the stream."

"I heard the signal answered," Jesse James replied, and he kept his horse swimming across the stream.

"What are you going to do?"

"Follow me."

"But it is like going to death."

Shouts of triumph came from the shore and Luke could see Timberlake's posse along the bank watching the bandits ride right into a trap which had been cleverly laid for them.

They were within pistol range and they could have riddled them with bullets, but preferred to have them gobbled up by the force on the other bank.

Jesse James glanced at the bank they were leaving and the bank they were approaching and then gazing at Luke's pale face, said:

"Follow me!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"DON'T COMMIT A CRIME."

ACROSS the foaming torrent Jesse James and Luke Miller swam their horses.

Luke had the greatest confidence in his leader. He believed that Jesse James would be able to take them through safely, but he could see no possibility of escape unless it was to cut their way through the enemy's ranks. The sheriff's deputies were drawn up on the ridge on the other side awaiting for them.

They had cocked shot guns and revolvers in their hands, and to Luke it seemed like folly to try to break through their ranks.

"Come on, come on, you are ours," cried one of the deputies.

Then a man who seemed to be in command of the cavalcade cried:

"Jesse James, we have got you. Come, don't make any resistance, for we don't want to harm you."

"Follow me!" spoke Jesse James, in an undertone, and then fixed his eye on the landing.

"Boys, they are going to fight!" said one man, who noticed the expression on the face of Jesse James. "Their is blood in their eyes."

Jesse kept on as though he intended to land, but their horses were caught in a current and borne around a point of rocks.

"Look out for them as they climb the bluff," shouted Timberlake, from across the stream.

Having reached the beach Jesse once more said:

"Follow me!"

Siroc leaped forward into what seemed a

ravine. Through a mass of tangled vines and bushes they pressed their way until they were in a subterranean passage.

"Come on, follow me, we have them now, my boy."

Before he knew it Luke Miller found himself riding through a cavern, which tunnel-like pierced the entire hill.

"Jesse?"

"Well, Luke."

"Do they know of this?"

"No."

"Did you know of it?"

"Yes."

"Then you acted on a plan?"

"I always do."

"Will we find them on the other side waiting for us?"

"No."

Jesse was correct.

Timberlake and his men were in utter ignorance of the presence of the cavern.

They passed through the cavern and found themselves in a valley.

When they had crossed the valley they entered a road and by a roundabout way recrossed the river and went to the Hite House, meeting no one but old Tom Briggs who was putting another load of wood on his wagon.

"Wall, yon'ns air er gittin' back from yer ride, be yer?"

"Yes," Jesse answered.

"Any noos?"

"None."

Then they rode on until they came to the Hite House.

In a few moments everything was wild excitement.

"We must go away at once," said Jesse James. "They will come and search the house and premises and must not find us here. We will not abandon this house entirely, but only temporarily. Come all of you and let us get out of here just as soon as we possibly can."

Then there was hurry on every side.

Horses were saddled. Small bundles of valuables, such as they could take with them, were huddled away out of sight.

"We are all ready," said Jim Cummins.

"Luke," said Jesse James to Miller.

"Well, Jesse?"

"It won't be safe to leave Blanche here."

"I believe that myself."

"Bring her along."

"I will especially take care of her and look after her," said Luke.

"Do."

They were all ready to go, when Luke Miller went to Blanche and said:

"Blanche, you must come."

"Where?"

"I don't know. We are wanderers. It won't do for your uncle to find you here. I believe now that he wants to murder you."

"So do I."

"Come with us."

"I will, Luke. I would rather trust my life with Jesse James than with such a man as Uncle Sam Franey."

"So would I. Here is your sacque, and hat and val; now, are you quite ready?"

"Yes."

"Come then, they wait."

"Have they a horse saddled for me?"

"They have."

"Then I am ready to go. Lead the way."

They hurried from the house.

The James Boys and their desperate band of highwaymen were all seated on their steeds, which were stamping and prancing the earth in their impatience to be away.

Luke assisted her to mount, and then they galloped away in the rear of the caravan.

It was now dark.

Half the night had been spent in a wild flight and then all halted.

A camp-fire was built, and the banditti gathered about it to warm their chilled forms.

Luke Miller spread some blankets on the ground for the girl.

She laid down and was soon sound asleep.

The night passed quietly until about an hour before the dawn of day, when their guards were run in by the sheriff's posse which had trailed them.

Luke Miller had wound a cloak about his form and was sitting down at the foot of a tree where he had fallen asleep.

The sudden crack of a Winchester rifle and the whizzing of a bullet was the first thing to rouse him.

Leaping to his feet he drew a revolver.

"To horse—to horse!" cried Jesse James.

"Blanche! Blanche!" he called, going to the side of the sleeping girl.

"Yes, what is the matter?" she answered.

"Get up. We are attacked," he answered.

The sharp crack, cracking of pistols and rifles could be heard on every side.

Bullets whizzed through the camp.

"To horse, to horse!" the stern, terrible voice of Jesse James could be heard calling in thunder tones.

Instantly every man was on his feet.

Luke Miller saddled Blanche's horse and his own in a few moments, and they then mounted.

"Scatter," cried Jesse.

That was the last command he gave that night.

Every man knew it, and knew the value of it.

Luke and Blanche dashed away together.

Through the woods like a whirlwind they flew. They dashed by the trees, and branches brushed and struck them, and once or twice they were both stunned.

"Blanche, lie low!" said Luke. "Lie as low in the saddle as you can, and be careful that you are not swept from the saddle."

"I will obey," she answered.

Then they flew on and on.

Soon they were clear of the forest.

They were now out on a stormy plain, with not a foe in sight.

"Blanche, we have shaken them off."

"Yes. Day dawns."

She was correct.

The eastern horizon had already become streaked with a pale light, which grew brighter and brighter every moment.

"We shall soon have daylight," said Luke.

When the sun rose they were on the top of a great high ridge. A long road led across the ridge in the direction of a body of timber.

"We will go that way," said Luke.

Not a house was in sight.

Virgin forest and prairie was just as it had been turned out from the hands of the Creator.

When they reached the heavy woods Luke began to look about for some cabin or house at which they could get food and shelter for a few hours.

They searched long ere their eyes were repaid with a glimpse of a house.

At last one was discovered.

They urged their tired steeds over the ground toward it and finally drew rein at the gate.

"What do you want?" demanded the owner, on being summoned.

"Food for ourselves and horses," he answered.

There was an imperativeness in his manner so fierce as to overawe the farmer, and he readily procured both.

They ate in silence, and when their horses were somewhat rested, they mounted and started off in a southwestern course.

"Luke, where are you going?" Blanche asked.

"To the Indian Territory, then across the country to old Mexico."

"Will you go there?"

"We will be safe there until our wrongs can be righted," he answered.

At this moment a dozen men suddenly appeared before them.

"Surrender!" cried the deputy in charge.

"Never!" cried Luke Miller, drawing his revolver.

"Luke, Luke!" cried Blanche, riding up to his side and seizing his arm, "don't commit a crime."

CHAPTER XIX.

BLANCHE AND HER UNCLE.

"RELEASE my hand, Blanche, and let me defend you!" he cried.

"No, no, don't!"

"Surrender is death."

"I assure you it is not," cried the officer in command. "We don't want to harm either of you, and certainly we don't want to harm that young lady."

"You won't harm her, will you?" cried Luke.

"Certainly not."

"But I—it is certain death for me to surrender."

"You shall have a fair trial."

"A fair trial, indeed," laughed Luke, bitterly. "I am to be hung for a crime I never committed."

"Foolish man! If you fight. The young lady may be killed," cried one of the officers.

Luke realized that a conflict would endanger the life of Blanche and he determined not to fight. What was his life compared with hers?

"It will be soon over anyway," he thought.

"They can but hang me and they will make quakers of it I know."

Then he threw down his weapons.

"Do you surrender?"

"Yes."

"Remember that to resist is death," cautioned the officer in command.

"I know all. You end this miserable existence as soon as you please. Were I alone I can assure you that I would give you the satisfaction of ending it now and at once; but as it is you have got me completely in your power. I cannot be the cause of the death of an innocent girl."

"You are acting wisely, young man."

"I am acting only as I am compelled to act. I have one request to make."

"What is it? Anything that we can consistently do for you we will do."

"I have no favor to ask for myself."

"Then for whom?"

"This girl."

"What is it?"

"Promise me that she shall not be given up to her uncle."

"Not given up to her uncle!" cried the deputy in amazement.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Her uncle, Sam Franey, is her most bitter enemy."

"Oh, you are mistaken."

The deputy had dismounted and taken up the weapons of Luke Miller and gave them to another.

"I am not mistaken," cried Luke energetically. "I know whereof I speak and I swear to you that if her uncle gets her in his possession he will put her to death."

"What, Sam Franey put his niece to death! Why, my dear sir, you must be suffering under some strange delusion."

"Do you know Franey?"

"Yes."

"Then you must know that he is a scoundrel."

"I don't—"

"What?"

"I say that Sam Franey is a gentleman."

"A gentleman! Oh, Heaven, give me back my weapons and then take me if you can."

"Oh, no, no—we take no chances."

Two or three deputies seized Luke, and pulling him from his horse, handcuffed him.

He fought, but it was all of no avail. He was overpowered and soon helpless.

Fixing his eyes on Blanche, he said:

"Poor girl, I pity you."

"You need not," answered the man commanding the deputies. "We will see that she is comfortable."

"But if she falls into the power of her uncle her death is certain."

"She need not."

"Will you see that she does not?" cried Luke, once more feeling a ray of hope in his bosom.

"She can go where she pleases."

"Give me that assurance, and you may hang me to the first tree."

"We are not executioners," answered the deputy. "We will take you to jail to await your trial."

Blanche Travers maintained a stoical silence. She determined that their captors should not see any sign of fear on her part.

They were conducted for several miles along the road together, though not allowed to communicate with each other. At the end of an hour they came to where the roads forked. One road led off to the county seat, and another to a small village called Snagville.

Sam Franey lived at Snagville.

Here the deputies came to a halt and waited for a few moments in consultation. Then it was decided that a part should go with Luke, to go to the county seat, to jail, under a part of the deputies, and Blanche with the others.

"But I want to go with him," cried Blanche.

"Yes, you said she was free; not a prisoner," cried Luke, "now let her go where she pleases."

"She can, after we have taken her to Snagville."

Luke Miller's face grew livid with wrath. His eyes seemed to almost start from their sockets, and he cried:

"Villain, you have lied to me!"

The wretch cowered before his just indignation, and Luke, tearing at his handcuffs, cried: "Villain, devil, monster, you have deceived me. Could I but free my hands, I would seize you by the throat, and no power could release my hold until I had choked the life from your miserable body."

But he could not free his hands.

The steel handcuffs were stronger than human rage, and he was firmly held.

"Oh, it's no use to rage and fume, Luke Mil-

ler," said Ellison, the deputy in charge, "you are cleverly trapped."

"Yes, trapped by believing that you were a man of honor."

"I was shrewd enough to entangle you."

"How?"

"By shrewdness."

"By lying and deceit, neither of which can be considered honorable, you have entrapped me, you white-livered coward. If I was only free I would make an end of you."

"Take him on," cried the deputy to the men who had Luke in charge.

Luke was then hurried away. Further remark was useless and he sat in silence upon the horse as he was hurried along toward the county seat.

The party with Blanche set out for Snagville.

"Mr. Allison, I know what your intentions are," said Blanche to the deputy.

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Well, what are they? I will see if you know as much as you pretend."

"To deliver me to my uncle."

"How old are you?"

"I am seventeen."

"Still a minor."

"Yes."

"Who is your guardian?"

"Samuel Franey."

"This uncle of yours?"

"Yes."

"Well, who is a more proper person to control you than the uncle whom the law has given power over you?"

"I know very well what you mean," she cried. "It was your intention from the very first to turn me over to my uncle."

"It was my intention from the very first to track the law."

"Track the law," she cried, her eyes flashing with fury. "The law is to be tracked while justice and mercy must be trampled. I am to be turned over to a man who will deliberately assassinate me, simply because you want to track the law."

"Would you have me break the law?"

"The law is or should be flexible, so as to admit of exceptions, that injustice may never be done."

"Well, young lady, I am tired of your talk." She took the hint and became silent.

At Snagville she was kept in the custody of the deputy until her uncle could be sent for.

He was off with a party of hirelings scouring the country for the missing girl. On receiving the news that she had been captured and was brought in, he put his horse to a dead run and galloped away to Snagville. He kept his horse at a run and halted not until he was in the village.

"Is she here, is she here?" he cried.

"Yes," one of the deputies answered.

"Where is she?"

"Jim Ellison has her."

Jim Ellison was sought. Jim was one of those scoundrels who could trample on conscience at any time for money.

"Jim, Jim!"

"Yes, Sam."

"Have you got her?"

"I have."

"Where is she?"

"In the house. Now, Sam, you know your reward?"

"What reward?"

"For the girl."

"Oh, yes—let me see, fifty dollars, wasn't it?"

"No."

"Twenty-five then."

"Here is your handbill," said Jim, drawing a small handbill from an inside pocket of his coat.

"What does it say?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"So much?"

"Yes."

"Well, you will take fifty?"

"No," cried Ellison. "There is your offer, and I have the girl. I will sue you. I am a lawyer myself, and have a brother on the bench. I will make you pay me every cent of the reward."

"Well, well, I will. Where is the girl?"

When they entered the room where Blanche sat, the uncle said:

"Go out and leave me with her."

Ellison retired.

He had not gone a moment until the uncle closed the door and turned his eyes upon the girl.

Blanche sat with her eyes upon the floor. She heard her uncle enter, knew he was near her, but did not raise her head to see him. She was

enough to awaken sympathy in any other person than her uncle.

But he was cold-hearted and cruel.

"Blanche."

"Go away. You have come to kill me," she cried.

"Poor girl. Her head is turned."

"No. It is not. I know you."

"Alas, she is mad."

"I am not, though. I shall be if you do not quit my presence."

"Poor, poor Blanche."

"Don't pity me."

"I will remove you to my home soon."

Leaving her under a strong guard, he went out and circulated the report far and near that his niece had been driven insane by her recent ill-treatment by Luke Miller and the James Boys.

When she was conveyed to his house there was a gang of people all along the streets to watch the poor girl and sympathize with her in her sad affliction.

She appealed to them, but in vain.

They only thought her appeals the ravings of a mad girl.

In her uncle's house the fair young prisoner was confined in a rear apartment, where escape was almost impossible, and where her shrieks and groans could not be heard on the street.

Three days elapsed without her seeing anybody save a great big German woman whom she could not understand. She acted as a sort of jailer for the fair prisoner, and brought her food.

On the evening of the third day her uncle, Sam Franey, entered her prison apartment.

"Now, Blanche, I have come to cure you," he said.

"You mean by that that my end is near?"

"No, you are insane," he began.

"Uncle, why keep up that foolish farce when we are alone? You know full well that I am as sane as you are. I am in your way, and it is your intention to put me to death. My poor father left me a fortune of which you have kept me in ignorance, hoping that I might die and you come in possession of it."

"Here, child, take this," said her uncle, mixing some powder in a glass of water. "It will cure you of wandering."

As he advanced toward her, she shrieked:

"Poison. You have determined to end my life in that way, have you?"

"No, no, it is for you. To cure you."

He took one more step toward her.

But she suddenly sprang aside, crying:

"I will not, I will not."

"You shall!" he hissed through his teeth, and then seizing her he strove to force the poison down her throat.

CHAPTER XX.

"HE IS A ROBBER."

LUKE MILLER and his guard rode for a long distance in silence. Then one of the men spoke.

"Say, feller, wot yer done?"

"Nothin'."

"Why hev they got yer?"

"I don't know."

"Jim Ellison said ye was a murderer."

"Jim Ellison was either a liar or mistaken."

"Sez he wasn't."

"He was."

"Wot yer think they'll do with yer?"

"Hang me, I suppose."

"Now, d'yer reckon they will?"

"I suppose so."

"An' yer say ye didn't do it?"

"I do."

"Wot'war yu doin' with 'em?"

"Who?"

"Ther James Boys."

The question placed Luke Miller in a very embarrassing situation.

Before he could make any answer a man mounted on an old sorrel horse came riding out of the woods carrying a gun on his shoulder.

His lank form and sharp, cadaverous features, as well as the dark, flapping brim of his hat, seemed familiar to Luke.

Turning up the brim of his hat, he said:

"Why, Lor' sakes erlive, wot cher doin' hyar?"

"I am on my way to jail," cried Luke.

"Ter jail? Wot cher goin' ter-jail fur?"

"Nothin'."

"Lor' sakes erlive, yer not meanin' thet they takes people ter jail jist fur nothin'?"

"He's charged with murder," said one of the deputies.

"Murder? I don't believe it. Why that air feller he help me pull out er great big cat fish,

an' I'm be hanged ef any feller ez helps me ketch er cat fish kin be very bad."

"See hyar, old rags, ye'd better be er goin' erlong. I don't want no truck with yer," said the deputy.

"Yer don't?"

"No."

"Now mebbe yer don't know me. Mebbe yer think I am green, an' ain't traveled some in these ere United States. Mebbe yer think I can't bound myself ercordin' ter Olney's Geograpy. Why, yer darned thin-skinned igneramus, I've traveled over an' erround ther hull sarcunnavigable globe from ther isthmus o' Gibraltar ter the rock o' Darien. I've been roasted erlive in ther North Pole and froze ter death in ther South Pole. I cut down ther North Pole an' brought it home fer a cistern pole, and fotch ther South Pole fer a lishin' pole. I washed my shirt in ther North Sea an' hung it on ther Equinoxial Line ter dry. I swam in ther Red Sea till I war an Injun, then ther Black Sea till I war a nigger. I then swam the Dead Sea till I war dragged out fur dead an' throwed in ther White Sea, an' thar I got back my nateral color. I tarred my hands and climbed Pompey's Pillar an' danced a four-handed reel on top. I upset the Egyptian Sphynx, an' run er race in ther Roman Amper-theater. Now, look you hyar, yer darned green-horn, don't yer think I know suthin'?"

"Wot's ail o' that ere got ter do with this prisoner?" asked the guard.

"Er heap."

"How?"

"Guess I knows he is innercent."

"Yer a blamed fool!"

"Look hyar, ole boss-fly, I won't stand too much o' yer soothin' syrup. Ef yer don't mind jist how yer open that 'tater trap o' you're ye'll git er fist full o' bones in yer face!"

At this moment a wild yell broke on the air.

A half dozen men burst from the bushes.

Down upon the guard they bore.

Each man wore a black mask over his face and carried a pair of revolvers in his hands.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang! went half a dozen revolver shots.

"What air that?"

"The James Boys."

"Ther James Boys!"

In a moment the guard was beating a most ungallant retreat, and Tom Briggs among the others.

Whipping his lank horse with his old hat, he yelled:

"Git up, gol ding yer, I don't want them air Jeems Boys ter git me."

In a moment Jesse James, Frank, Jim Cummins, Bill Chadwell, Clell Miller, Ed McMillan and Charley Ford were about the prisoner.

"Luke, what does this mean?" Jesse James asked.

"I was run to earth."

"Captured?"

"Yes."

"You should not have done that, my boy."

"I could not help it."

"I thought you would have died before surrender?"

"So I would, but I had to surrender to save another innocent person from being killed."

"Do you mean Miss Blanche Travers?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"A prisoner."

"Has her uncle got her?"

"He has not. Some deputies took her to Snagville."

"It's all the same. She will be turned over to her uncle," said Jesse James, removing the handcuffs from the wrist of the prisoner.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Sam Franey lives at Snagville, and he will, beyond a doubt, have the girl a prisoner in a few hours. Then he will kill her."

Luke Miller had feared as much all the time, and he became almost frantic with anxiety.

"Let me go! Let me go at once!" he cried.

"Where?"

"To Snagville."

"Why, Luke, are you a fool?"

"No, no, but he may kill her."

"You couldn't do any good. You would be killed or a prisoner as soon as you entered the town."

"No, no! I must save her!"

Jesse James and Frank had all they could do to keep the frantic Luke Miller from going to Snagville.

But for two days they kept him in the woods. On the third day he stole away from the camp of the banditti and hurried to Snagville.

Throughout the entire day he remained con-

cealed in the woods, and at night crept to the village.

By accident he came to the house of Mr. Sam Franey, and stole around to the rear of it in hope of seeing the prisoner.

He heard a cry which startled him.

"That was a woman's voice," he thought.

"Surely I have heard it before."

Then came a voice clear and distinct, saying:

"Poison! You have determined to end my life in that way, have you?"

Then another voice answered:

"No, no, no, it is for you. To cure you."

A moment later there came another cry:

"I will not. I will not."

"You shall."

Then he heard some one leap across the floor and seize some one.

Luke ran to the window and seized the shutter, which was closed.

"Heaven help her, he will kill her," he cried.

"Help, help, help!" she cried.

He gave the shutter a tremendous jerk and pulled it from its hinges.

Down it fell to the ground.

Luke Miller threw up the window with a dash and like a flash of light sprang into the room.

There a sight met his gaze that was well calculated to startle and horrify any one.

Sam Franey had been so intent on committing murder that he had not noticed the entrance, forcible as it had been.

With glaring eyes flashing with demoniac fury he was bending over the girl and striving to force the deadly poison down her throat.

"Here, take this, take it, you shall," he hissed striving to force the poison in her mouth.

"Help, help, help! Is there no one to help me?"

"No," he hissed. "No one to help you. I will kill you. I will make you drink this, and when you are dead, I will own all the buried millions your father left."

"Help, help, help! will no one help me?"

"Yes—I will."

Next moment a blow from Luke's fist sent the would-be murderer sprawling on the floor.

"Villain, monster!" he cried. "Let me kill him!"

"No, don't stain your hands with blood."

The noise and confusion soon brought several persons into the room. Among them was three or four of Timberlake's men.

"Ho, ho! what does this mean?" demanded Jim Ellison.

"What hit you, Sam? Your face is all bleeding."

"He did it."

"Who?"

"Luke Miller. Seize him, he is a robber."

"A robber, a robber," cried a dozen at once.

"Yes, a robber, seize him," cried the infuriated Sam Franey.

"Yes, seize him. Kill him if he resists," put in Jim Ellison.

Then four or five men started toward Luke, but quick as a flash he had whipped out a pair of revolvers, and leveling them at the crowd, in a calm, determined voice said:

"Not yet—the man who makes a step dies."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE RESCUE.

It was a fine tableau.

There was something tragic and awful in the manner of the man who was defying the officers.

Jim Ellison, who had by false promises, treachery and deceit, made both Luke Miller and the girl captives, now fearing the wrath of the man he had wronged, retreated from the room.

"Come back, you wretch," cried Luke. "Come back, you coward, that I may kill you first."

Old Sam Franey was a coward, and dreaded the vengeance of the young outlaw.

"Don't let him hurt any one. Don't let him kill me. He killed his own uncle, and of course he would kill me."

There was a moment's hesitation.

At such critical periods one fears to speak lest they will say something wrong, and it would be fatal to commit an error.

The silence was broken at last by Luke Miller himself.

"Gentlemen, I know what you would do. I know that you think you are fulfilling your duty to the law. I am thought to be an outlaw, a murderer of my uncle, but I am not. I never harmed my uncle nor any one else. This man Sam Franey was about to murder his own niece."

"It is false," cried Franey. "What would I kill Blanche for? She is crazy."

"She is not crazy. That report has been put in circulation by Franey in order to have an excuse for imprisoning and killing her."

"It is not so."

There was a look of doubt in the eyes of the men. They gazed at one and then at the other. Luke, with a smile which betrayed his confidence in his own powers, said:

"Gentlemen, when I entered he was in the act of forcing the contents of that glass tumbler down this young lady's throat. Examine the glass and you will find that it contains deadly poison."

With a yell of fear Sam Franey leaped forward and kicked the glass, smashing it into a hundred pieces.

"Crack!" went one of Luke's pistols, and with a terrible howl of pain Franey fell on the floor.

The bullet had struck his foot, cutting a piece out of the side and passing down through the floor.

"That, Sam Franey, for destroying the evidence of your guilt. I could have shot out your left eye, or put a bullet hole through any part of your body, had I desired to do so. Take notice, all, that I did not shoot to kill."

For a moment fear and consternation held each man dumb.

At last one man more bold than the rest spoke.

"Luke Miller!"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you propose to do?"

"I think I have convinced you all that this man wants to kill his niece."

"False!" roared Mr. Franey. "Why should I want to kill my own niece?"

"Why should he?" cried Luke Miller. "There is abundant reason that he should. She is heiress to a vast fortune."

"Where?"

"In Mexico."

"Nobody ever heard of that."

"She inherits from her father, and should she be put out of the way her uncle inherits it from her."

"He lies," groaned the wounded man.

Without paying any attention to him, Luke Miller continued:

"Now, gentlemen, do you want this matter over without further bloodshed?"

There was hesitation and a profound silence for a few moments.

"I want you to bear in mind," said Luke, "that when I shoot again I will shoot to kill."

"What do you want?"

"Let me go and take the young lady with me and there will be no more trouble. If you refuse to let us go there will be blood—"

Bang!

Bang!

Crack!

Crack!

A volley of guns and pistols fired at a safe distance from the hall.

The room was darkened with smoke and the bullets whizzed like hail through the air.

Down went Luke to the floor.

"He's done for, he is killed," shouted Sam Franey. But just at the moment when he thought Luke harmless, he rose like a phoenix from the smoke and ashes and began firing right and left with remarkable carelessness.

Men ran pell mell from the room.

Two or three were slightly wounded, but none seriously. The light continued until all were in the street.

Luke then sprang to the side of the thoroughly terrified girl and said:

"Blanche!"

"Luke!"

"Come on."

"Where are you going, Luke?"

"I will rescue you or die—come on!"

She was frightened almost out of her wits, but he took her hand in his and led her to the window.

Both leaped through to the ground and he hurried her away toward his horse.

CHAPTER XXII.

JESSE AND SIROC.

"LUKE!"

Blanche had at last regained her voice.

"Well, Blanche, don't be frightened," he answered, in an assuring manner.

"Where is your horse?"

"Not far."

"Can you see him?"

"Not yet."

"Hark!"

"What you hear?"

"There is some one in the woods beside ourselves."

"Why?"

"I hear them."

"Where?"

"Out there."

She pointed in the darkness.

"On our right?"

"I thought so."

"Sounds are deceiving in these woods."

"I know it, Luke."

"The whispering is on our left."

"Who is it and what is it?" he asked.

"Some of our pursuers are trying to head us off."

Luke said:

"Wait a moment."

"It was so dark she could not see what he was doing, but from the clicking of his revolver she knew full well that he was reloading the empty chambers.

"Luke!" she whispered.

"What?" he asked.

"Don't kill any one."

"Heaven knows I would not if I could keep from it," he answered.

"Can't you?"

"No, I may have to do it."

"Why, can't you frighten them as you have done?"

"The time has come when we cannot depend on frightening. They are bold and determined to have us. I am just as determined that they shall not."

After a few moments he whispered:

"Come on."

Slowly they went forward through the darkness.

"Stop."

She stopped.

"Blanche, will you be afraid to stay here by this big tree for a few moments?" he asked.

"Are you going away from me?"

"Only for a moment."

"I can stay if necessary."

"It is necessary," he answered.

"Then I will stay."

"Don't be discouraged, for I will not be gone long."

She answered in the affirmative.

"Crouch down close to the root of the tree and remain there."

"I will."

"Don't make any outcry unless you are attacked and then call my name."

With this parting injunction he left her and went away in the darkness.

His horse not over a dozen rods on his right, and the dangerous noise was now on his left.

Luke had not crawled far in that direction ere he heard the sound of voices in conversation.

They were talking in a low tone, and he could scarce make out what they said.

But by lying flat on the ground he managed to crawl near enough to catch the following:

"It don't make no difference to us, Gregory."

"No."

"Whether he killed his uncle or didn't ain't nothin' neither here nor there, yer know. Sam Franey wants him out o' his way."

"Course he does."

"He'll give us two thousand ter kill 'em both, or a thousand fer each one we kill."

"I don't see why he wants ter kill ther gal."

"Guess ther feller told ther truth. Wall, we've got ter hump ourselves, and git ter huntin' 'em, I say, Gregory, s'pose yer go down that ravine, an' I'll go up it. Now if he's got er hoss hitched anywhere in these 'ere woods, jist yer whistle. Ef we kin git ter it afore he does, then we kin jist lay down an' wait until he comes."

Luke began to tremble with excitement.

His horse was up the ravine—the direction taken by one of the men.

Luke determined to head him off.

He crept up the ravine after the rascal.

Luke made no noise. He had contracted the habit of walking without noise, and when he crept away after the fellow, no Indian warrior could have moved with less noise.

But despite all his caution his foot pressed a dry stick and a slight crackling was the result.

"Air yer comin' after me, Diggory?" Gregory asked.

"Yes," he answered in a whisper.

"What air it?"

"Whist!"

"See nuthin'."

"Sh—"

"Fonnd 'em?"

"Yes."

Then he crept on nearer and nearer to him.

Suddenly he came to his side, and seizing the fellow by the throat thrust the muzzle of a cocked revolver in his face.

"Speak or move, and you are a dead man," he hissed.

"Oh, don't—"

"Hush! not a word."

"I'm munn!"

"Hold up hands."

The trembling wretch obeyed.

He held his hands up above his head, and then Luke took some cord from his own pockets and tied him to a tree.

Then he put the muzzle of his pistol to the prisoner's temple, and whispered:

"You have some means of calling your companion?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"A whistle."

"Call him!"

"Do you want him too?"

"I do."

"To kill him?"

"No."

Luke got a handkerchief ready to put over his mouth the moment he sounded the call.

"Call him quick."

The prisoner gave utterance to three short, sharp whistles.

"Aha!" the other could be heard saying.

"We've got 'em."

Luke hastily bound the handkerchief over his prisoner's mouth and went to a tree not far away, and waited behind it with his revolver in his hand ready to knock him down.

"Hev yer got 'im, eh? Fonnd one or both, eh? Wall, remember, I come in fur my sheer o' ther boodle."

Suddenly Luke stepped from behind the tree.

"That yer, Diggory?"

"Yes."

Whack!

The revolver fell with crushing weight on his head, and he fell senseless to the ground. Luke Miller knew there were others more dangerous than either of these two to encounter.

Binding and gagging the second prisoner, he hurried back to the tree where he had left Blanche.

"Blanche, Blanche!"

"Here," she answered, rising from the ground at the root of the tree.

"Come on."

She said she was ready, and taking her hand, he hurried with her to his horse.

Mounting, he took her behind him.

At this moment the earth and air seemed to tremble beneath the tremendous yells from their pursuers.

Every man capable of bearing arms in Snagville had turned out, and with gun and pistol was scouring the woods.

The yell was the result of discovering the two prisoners tied and gagged at the root of the tree.

"Here they are, here they are," cried a dozen as Luke and Blanche galloped away.

A score of shots were fired at them.

Some men on horseback threw down the fence and galloped across a field to head them off.

Luke's horse was an excellent animal and he sped like the wind over the ground. Luke let him out but bearing his double burden they were gaining on them.

"We must fight," he said.

At this moment a man mounted on a powerful black horse dashed up the hill and in a voice of thunder cried:

"This way, fly for your lives, and I will cover your retreat."

It was Jesse James on his wonderful horse Siroc.

"Go on, Luke, save Blanche Travers and I will redeem my pledge."

CHAPTER XXIII.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

Luke's horse sped forward along the dark road.

A few moments later and they heard the rapid discharge of pistol shots.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

So fast that one could scarcely count the shots. The wild shrieks from behind told that the bullets were taking effect.

A few moments later the wild clatter of hoofs was heard.

It was Siroc coming at full speed.

But few men ever enjoyed the pleasure of seeing Siroc go at full speed. Only those who have seen him can have any idea of the horse's wonderful power.

His hoofs beat the earth so rapidly that the

eye could not see them, and his body seemed only a dark streak along the ground.

"Ha, here we are," cried Jesse James.

He drew rein by their side, and Luke asked: "Are they coming?"

"No."

"Won't they pursue us further?"

"I think not; we have put a flea in their ear. They don't care to follow us now," Jesse James answered.

They jogged along in silence for a short distance, when Jesse spoke again:

"Luke, don't you believe me now?"

"About what?" Luke asked.

"Don't you believe I have a pledge to keep?"

"Yes."

"But you have doubted me."

"Well—that is—"

"Oh, say yes; speak out boldly. You know you have doubted me."

"I did."

"But I tell you the truth when I say that I have a pledge to keep. Marian Travers was my warmest, best friend. I loved him like a brother. He saved my life at the risk of his own. All through the four long years of bloody war we were in the saddle side by side. He shared his blanket with me when I had none, and when I was weak and sick, benumbed and chilled, he took his coat from his back and put it on me. When I was hungry he gave me all his rations, and insisted on my eating. And when I was drowning he swam to me, amid a wild shower of Yankee bullets, and rescued me, at the imminent risk of his own life. Would I not be worse than a monster not to have some regard for such a friend? Then when he died in my arms, and told me of his daughter and the vast fortune he had left for her, I determined that that cruel, avaricious uncle should not rob her, and I shall keep my pledge, made to a dying friend, at any and every cost."

"Jesse James, I believe you now," cried Luke Miller.

"And so do I," Blanche added.

"Will you trust me in the future?"

"Yes."

Both answered.

"Then all will go better. Much misery and suffering might have been avoided if you had only trusted me in the past."

At this moment they heard in the distance the rumbling of a wagon and a not unmusical voice singing:

"In ther starlight, in ther starlight,
Let us wander, gay an' free,
Fur thar's nothin' in ther daylight
Half so deer ter you au' me."

"Who is that singing?" Luke asked.

"Some belated farmer going to his home," answered Jesse.

"He has a very good voice."

"And sings in excellent time."

"Yes."

"That voice seems familiar," said Luke Miller.

"So it does."

The wagon was coming toward them, for the rattling of wheels and jolting of the bed became louder and louder every moment as it approached nearer and nearer to them.

"We will soon know whether we have ever met before," Jesse remarked.

In a few moments the wagoner came up alongside them and in a drawling voice cried out:

"Helloa, mistur; why, whar yer goin' so late?"

"Where are you going?" Jesse asked.

"Home."

"Home?"

"Yes."

"Say, mister, are you not a little like old Peter Rugg?"

"Dun know, sir; I never wor acquainted with old Peter. I knowed Uncle Johnny Rugg purty well, and he wor a bang up chap all eround. Why, that air ole feller could drink whisky enough to float him in forty-eight hours' time! It's er fact, er I'm er liar."

"But you seem to be always going home and to never get there."

"Do I? Well, I can't help it nohow. Now I'm goin' ter git thar ter-night."

"Where were you last night?" Jesse asked.

"Ter hum."

"Were you going home when I met you?"

"Yer bet."

"Well, you were going from the route you follow now."

"Great suds erlive, man, er feller's got ter go a'most every way in ther world ter git erround all these ere hills an' hollers an' gullies."

"You mean you are going in a roundabout way?"

"Yer bet."

"Go on then."

"All right, fellers. Good-night, an' nex' time I catch er great big cat fish I'll make yer take er mess o' it."

"Thank you."

Jesse and Luke rode on, leaving the wagoner to rumble on his way.

"I don't know what to think of that fellow," Jesse remarked. "I am sometimes half convinced that he is a detective."

"That is impossible," Luke Miller returned with a laugh.

"No, it is not. Pinkerton has a detective on his force who is shrewd enough to play any part, and his skill in make up and disguise is so complete that he can change in any way he wants to. He can be a genteel, refined young man, a middle aged man, an old man, a countryman, a woman, a negro, Indian, anything."

"Do you believe this old backwoods exaggerater the detective?"

"No, I don't hardly think it, yet such a thing might be possible."

Luke Miller laughed.

"Oh, you need not laugh. I used to laugh at Pinkerton's efforts, but I have learned from past experience that this fellow is not to be laughed at. He is no ordinary man."

"What is his name?"

"Carl Greene."

Luke Miller had heard of the famous detective, as who has not? Carl Greene's name is as familiar as Pinkerton.

In fact, he has given to the Pinkertons the fame they have earned.

They went along the road for a short distance after passing Briggs, and came to a camp fire.

To their astonishment they discovered that their own friends occupied the camp.

There was Jim Cummins, Frank James, Wood Hite, and Bob Younger.

They had built up a camp-fire.

Jesse James was amazed at their boldness.

"Why did you come here on the road where Timberlake could take you in, or see you for miles around?" he demanded, somewhat angrily.

"There is no danger here," Frank answered.

"We know Timberlake and his stupid followers are all asleep. We can stay until daylight and be going."

An hour before day they were once more on the march.

As they came to a lane with a house on one side and a barn on the other they were halted.

It still lacked half an hour to daylight.

Jesse James now knew that they had run into a trap set by Timberlake.

"Back to the woods," he cried.

A volley of rifle shots met them as they wheeled about, and then they discovered that retreat was cut off.

"To the east—the way is clear."

No, it was not.

They were met by another withering volley. The bullets and buckshot flew like rain down the lane, and it was a wonder that all were not swept from their horses.

They were between two fires.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MEETING HOUSE.

JESSE JAMES took in the situation in a moment.

He leaped from the saddle and began to throw down the fence on their right.

He hurled the rails left and right, and standing back before the gap he had made, cried:

"Through here. Charge."

The smoke lay so thick in the lane, for the fog of morning was damp and heavy, and the deputies at either end of the lane did not see them until they were through the fence.

Away they galloped across the field.

"After them!" roared Timberlake, mounting his powerful iron gray horse.

"Come on, boys, there goes the James Boys. Let us bring them back, dead or alive!"

Then Timberlake's men, with wild yells, mounted and gave chase.

But it was no use.

The sun arose and they found themselves far out on the country road, with not one of the James Boys in sight.

"Well, Ephraim," said Timberlake, drawing rein. "We have lost them again."

"So we have," the deputy called Ephraim answered.

"It is very discouraging. Those James Boys have more lives than a cat."

"Yes."

"Get them in a trap and they always wriggle out."

"See here, Timberlake, the trail has all split up and goes in almost every direction."

"You are correct, it does."

"Suppose we divide and follow them."

Ephraim's advice was always good.

He was a brave, cool-headed man, and knew more about following a trail than any of the others.

They followed his suggestion, but all without effect.

The James Boys and their daring brigands seemed to have passed away from the face of the earth.

After three or four days all trace of the James Boys was lost, and Timberlake disbanded most of the deputies and sent them home, while he kept Ephraim and two or three more faithful followers about him.

It was all to no purpose.

Search was in vain, and skill and perseverance was all to no purpose. The James Boys and their friends were gone.

The Bear Creek meeting house was a frame building, a sort of a Union church used by four or five denominations.

It was built on the banks of the creek known as Bear Creek, from which the church derived its name.

In the fall of the year the preacher of this church came to hold his usual monthly meetings. He was as usual greeted with a full house.

Services were held on Saturday and Sunday.

Rev. John Roan, the preacher, was a short, stout, bald-headed preacher. Slow of speech, and with a voice always keyed up to the highest pitch. He could not speak without screaming, and took fully half the house to prance about in.

It was Saturday evening and the people had gathered in the church.

Horses were hitched to the trees, and men were squatted about the house talking and whittling sticks with their pocket knives.

"Well, they hain't got the James Boys," said one.

"No," another answered. "There comes Timberlake now."

Timberlake and Ephraim came to the meeting-house after tying their horses to the trees.

"Hasn't Brother Roan come yet?" asked Uncle Jimmy Ryan.

"No."

"Well, it's time."

Everybody else thought it was time, but for some reason Brother Roan failed to show up.

Suddenly three elderly gentlemen came riding up to the meeting-house, dismounted and hitched their horses. One remained near them while two came toward the meeting-house. One carried a pair of ancient saddlebags in which was a hymn book and Bible. As he went in he said to the men lounging about on the outside:

"Brother Roan sent me to preach in his place. I am Brother Clark. Come in and let us get down to business."

He was a tall, powerful man, with snow-white hair and beard, but seemed to possess considerable vigor.

There was an electrical power in his voice which thrilled all, and they instinctively followed him. The tall man calling himself Brother Clark marched up to the pulpit and took his place in it.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, I came to tell you that owing to some circumstances beyond his control, Brother Roan can't come, and he sent me in his place. I am here to preach for him."

"Oh, ain't he an nice old man," Mrs. Bamfass whispered to Mrs. Fancamran.

"Yes."

"He is so tall."

"And looks splendid."

"What a voice."

"Like a lion's."

Bear Creek meeting-house had never had a sensation, and now it was to have one which would make it famous.

Some of the older men could only stare at the preacher as he fumbled about the hymn book for a hymn that he was quite sure would be familiar to all.

At last he found it, and in a clear, unfaltering voice said:

"I will line this familiar hymn, and hope you will all join in the singing. I have a sore throat and bad cold, with bronchial and tonsil affections, so you cannot depend on me."

He then read:

"Am I a soldier of the cross,
A follower of the Lamb,
And shall I fear to own His cause,
Or blush to speak His name?"

The long, familiar hymn was read through, and old Uncle Jimmy Wheeler, who nearly always took the lead in singing, was clearing his throat to commence, when the door suddenly burst open, and to the amazement of everybody, Brother Ream suddenly bounced into the meeting-house. He was devoid of coat or hat, and his fat face and bald head were red as a turkey cock's, while his eye flashed with rage and hate.

Shaking his fist at the stranger in the pulpit, he cried:

"I have been robbed. Stop that scoundrel in the pulpit—don't let him desecrate the awful sanctity of the pulpit. I tell ye he robbed me—he's a thief!"

"What do you mean?" asked Timberlake, hurrying to the side of the excited preacher.

"Seize him—arrest him!" yelled the excited parson. "Don't let him disgrace Bear Creek meetin'-house!"

CHAPTER XXV.

PULL UP OR A BULLET.

TIMBERLAKE, who was near to the excited preacher, hurried over to him and said:

"Stop and explain, Mr. Roan."

"He halted me on the road and robbed me of my watch and my money. I had sold a cow and calf and had thirty dollars an' he tuk it, yes, sir, he tuk it."

Timberlake turned his eyes upon the white-haired man in the pulpit and asked:

"What have you to say to this charge?"

"It's true," came the answer.

"Who are you?"

At a single sweep of his hand he tore away his long gray hair and beard and cried:

"Don't you know me?"

"Jesse James."

"At your service."

"At him!"

"Hold!"

So sharp was the command that every one was constrained to obey. Even Timberlake, the boldest, bravest sheriff in the land, was awed by the cry.

"Timberlake, what do you want?" asked Jesse.

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"Do you intend taking me?"

"Certainly."

"How many men have you, Timberlake?"

"Two. Quite enough to take you. Besides, I have all these people here to help me."

Jesse James laughed a cool, desperate laugh, and rolling the wig and beard up into a ball threw them carelessly into one corner of the room.

"Timberlake."

"Surrender, Jesse."

Then Jesse James looked up and saw three pairs of revolvers leveled at his breast.

"You surely don't mean it, do you?" he said, with a smile.

"We do," cried Timberlake. "Don't make an effort to draw a gun or you'll get hurt."

"I take in the situation, friend Timberlake. I am perfectly familiar with all the little technical features of a situation as delicate as mine. I want to assure you that I fully appreciate the fact that a single spasmodic contraction of the forefinger of your hand might be detrimental to my health. Yet I am perfectly safe."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't dare harm me."

"We don't?"

"No, it would ruin your prospects of a long life if you did. Timberlake, just glance at the windows on either side of the house."

No one had thought of glancing at the windows before.

The weather being warm the windows were open.

A wild yell went up from the meeting-house as they saw two men at each window leveling cocked revolvers at the crowd.

"Those are my men, faithful and true to the last to me," said Jesse James.

"Now, all who have pistols, drop them, and no man shall be hurt."

Everybody dropped his pistol.

"Hands up."

Jesse then proceeded to rob the people of the church, the object for which he had planned.

"Timberlake, it is all I can do to resist the longings of an aching heart to kill you."

"You promised you would not."

"I did, and I won't," Jesse answered. "Here, ladies and gentlemen, hurry up with the collections of money, watches and jew-

elry; hand it over. It's usually the case that collections are taken up after the sermon, but I take up my collections in advance."

The money, pocket-books and jewels were handed over rapidly.

"Here, sir, is one of my earrings," said a little woman. "I can't get the other out."

"Very well; you keep one and I will the other," laughed Jesse, thrusting the tiny ear drop in his vest pocket.

"He's right nice, ain't he, Charley?" said the girl to her brother.

Jesse James did fairly in his church collection, and when he had taken about all that there was to take, he said:

"Now, boys, we'll go."

He was at the door. Turning, he grasped Timberlake's hand and said:

"Good-bye till we meet again. It may not be so friendly next time."

In three minutes Jesse James and his few followers were mounted on their horses galloping away like the wind.

"Jesse," called Frank, "won't Timberlake be apt to pursue us?"

"Yes."

"No, he won't!" answered Jim Cummins.

"Why not?"

"Because I turned loose their horses and stampeded them."

"That was very thoughtful," said Jesse.

"Jim Cummins, you are a treasure!" Frank James put in.

"Thank you," Jim modestly returned.

They ascended a hill. When they had gained the top Jesse called out:

"Halt!"

Then every man drew rein.

"What do you see, Jesse?"

"The stage is coming."

"You are right!"

"It is coming this way."

"Loaded with passengers."

"Perhaps money."

Somehow the very mention of a stage coach seems to set a highwayman wild.

The very fact that a bit of professional work was to be done was enough to make each heart bound wildly with joy.

"We will soon have work, boys," cried Jesse, in an undertone. "Come down the hill into this great green lane and we will there wait until the stage coach comes up and then pounce out upon them."

Having reached the lane Jesse deposited his men along in the deeper shadows of the hedge with instructions to wait for his call. He took up his post in the middle of the lane.

Before many minutes the stage coach came rolling over the top of the hill, and then getting on the slanting side came rumbling down toward the bandit king.

When it had come within hailing distance he rode boldly toward it, his pistol in his hand and cried:

"Halt—pull up, or a bullet."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LIAR GIVES GOOD ADVICE.

Two of the principal characters of our story will demand our attention at this point, and we wish to bring up all together and get a good start.

Luke Miller and Blanche Travers were, as the reader will remember, with Jesse James and his band when they made the wonderful retreat from the lane.

The lane seemed to have become a fire-vomiting volcano, so many were the shots fired into it by Timberlake's posse.

Timberlake had laid his plans well, but the judgment, coolness and quick foresight of Jesse James, the bandit king, had saved the band.

All through the long flight, amid dangers and hardships, Luke and Blanche had been side by side.

Her horse became exhausted and fell behind. Then Luke remained behind with her.

The horse grew slower and slower until they were compelled to stop at a house where lived a man who had formerly known Luke and was under obligations to him for some past kindness.

"Yes, you can stay with me as long as you like, Luke," said the owner of the house.

"Have you heard of me, Mr. Fusselman?"

"I've heard all about it, Luke."

"I didn't do the deed, Mr. Fusselman. Please believe me innocent."

"I know ye air, Luke. Why, I've known ye ever since ye war a baby, and I know ye wouldn't ever do a bad trick."

"Everybody believes me guilty and I will be

hung if captured. Did I know I would get justice I would surrender myself."

They remained two days at the house of Mr. Daniel Fusselman and then once more started on their wandering.

Luke had lost sight of the James Boys and did not know that he would ever see them again.

"Maybe they have all been killed," suggested Blanche.

"No. They could not annihilate them in a week."

"All the world may have arisen up against them, Luke, and hunted them down."

"All the world has been up against them, Blanche."

"Has it?"

"Yes, for near twenty years the whole world has been trying to capture Frank and Jesse James and the band they have gathered about them but failed."

"I hope we may get out of the country, Luke, for I don't want to link our fate to the James Boys."

"Neither do I. I wish, oh, how I wish that we were out of the country."

The sun was low in the west. Luke knew it would soon be night, and it was his intention to get just as far out of the country before daylight as possible.

"Luke, I see some horsemen."

"Where, Blanche?"

"Look down the valley."

On their left stretched away a long distance to the north a valley. It was quite narrow, covered with tall grass, and the hills on either side were clothed with a dense growth of forest trees.

A road wound down that valley, and Luke saw three horsemen about a mile and a half away coming toward them.

"Back into the woods, Blanche!" he cried.

"Who are they, Luke?"

"I don't know. They may be friends, but the chances are they are some of Timberlake's or Pinkerton's hirelings."

They wheeled about their horses and dashed into the woods.

A path led due south through a dense forest, and this they followed.

It was an old blind path, and the grass had grown up in it, and the trees had grown so close to the side of it that their branches lapped over and touched each other, forming in places a roof overhead.

They followed this path until the sun had set, and night began to appear. Then Luke determined to find a more suitable road for night travel.

"It will be so dark in these woods that we can't see to travel, Blanche. If we can get out on the prairie we may be able to get over several miles before morning."

"Who is that, Luke?"

"Do you see any one?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Look down there by the stream. See—isn't he fishing?"

"Yes, I believe I do see some one now."

"It's a man."

"Yes, I can make out his hat."

"And fishing rod?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps he could tell us how to get out of here, Luke."

"Maybe we don't dare speak with him."

"Why not?"

"He could tell them which route we had gone."

They drew rein, and for a few moments gazed at the man who sat patiently at the side of the stream holding his fishing rod and line over the water.

"He don't seem to have very good luck," said Blanche. "He has not got a bite."

"I am going to speak with him," Luke at last declared.

They rode down to the fisherman, who, looking up, said:

"Why, how dy do, stranger, 'clar ter gracious, never saw sich luck in my life. Why, I've cotched cat-fish out o' here big ez an ox, ef I ain't I'm er liar."

"Held on, we have met before, I believe," said Luke Miller.

"Right ye air, my royal juke. How air yer, anyhow, an' how be ther lovely gal wot's with yer?"

"We are well. What are you doing?"

"Tryin' ter fish; but say, peddur, whair air yer goin'?"

"Tryin' to find a road that leads southwest."

"Yer air!"

"Yes."

"Wall, I'm yer friend, podnur, an' now ef ye'll put any confidence in ther champion liar I'd like ter ax yer some questions an' gin yer some advice."

Luke Miller began to feel a trifle uneasy.

The champion liar began to wind up his reel on his rod.

"I allers like to take good keer o' things. Don't yer?"

"Yes."

"Wall, I see yer a wonderin' wot I'm goin' ter ax yer?"

"I can't think what information you can want from me," said Luke.

His hand slid down to the belt about his waist, where it rested on the butt of a revolver.

"A good deal, and nobody else but you can gin it ter me. Are yer strong ernuff to stand a leetle bit o' advice?"

"Yes."

"Wall, hyar goes then. I think yer been in purty pore company fur ther last few weeks. Now, I don't hev no insinuations erbout that air gal who's with yer, but them men ye've been with. D'yer know who they air?"

Luke Miller was for a moment almost breathless with an awful dread.

"Yer know what I mean, don't yer?"

"I suppose so."

"Wall, now jist take a fool's advice, an' give them thar fellers ther shake, see?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THROUGH MUD AND RAIN.

THE stage driver heard the command of Jesse James to

"Halt, pull up or a bullet."

Every stage driver in Missouri knew full well what that command meant. The driver's blood was almost frozen in his veins and he pulled his horses to a standstill and gazed with eyes which seemed starting from their sockets at the dark figure of a horseman standing directly in his path.

Tall, giant-like seemed that rider.

His horse seemed like a monster beast in size and there was something so awful in his command that those who heard it always felt impelled to obey.

"Hands up!" cried Jesse.

The driver, who was all that was visible to the highwayman, did not obey with becoming alacrity and Jesse in a rage cried:

"Hands up or I will make it toes. The command of the road agent is one which should be obeyed."

"Yes, sir—here go my hands."

"Aye, that's done quite beautiful. Now answer a few questions for me."

"I—I will if I can. Please don't—d—d—don't shoot me if you please."

"How many have you inside your stage?"

"I—I forget."

"You forget. Perhaps an ounce of lead in your brain would increase your memory some."

"Oh, oh, sir, please, please don't harm me."

"If you tell me the truth I won't."

"I will."

"How many have you?"

"Five or six."

"Which is it, five or six?"

"I swear I forget."

"A stage driver who forgets the number of passengers he has deserves to be shot."

"Oh, oh, oh, pray don't shoot me—I have done the best I could."

"Do you think they are dangerous fellows in there?" asked Jesse, riding toward the door.

"I—I don't know."

"Keep your hands up."

"Yes, sir."

"I am going to do this job alone, be there one man inside or a dozen."

Jesse galloped up to the door and tapping on the glass with the muzzle of a pistol called out:

"Hello in there."

"What d'ye want?" demanded a gruff voice from within.

"I stopped to ask you the time of night and to inform you it is going to rain."

"Well, go long."

"Oh, be more civil."

"Get away from there or I will spoil your pretty face."

"By Jove, I believe I know that voice," Jesse James thought.

"Come, go on, driver."

"Hold on."

"What d'ye want?"

"I want your money, watches and jewels, ladies and gents, such trilles as may possibly be burdensome to you."

"I thought so."

"Bang!" went a pistol shot.

"That's settled."

The bold highwayman was seen to reel in his saddle and fall.

"Hurrah, killed him first shot."

A wild yell came from the dark hedgerows, and half a dozen avengers, all mounted on powerful horses, thundered down on the stage coach.

"They have killed Jesse and now don't spare one of them," roared Frank James.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Bullets began to riddle the stage coach.

"Hold, hold!" cried Jesse James, starting up from the ground where he had fallen. "Don't fire another shot."

"Jesse, are you bad wounded?"

"No—I was stunned," cried Jesse. "That was all."

"Let us avenge you, Jesse."

"No, no, bring them out."

The stage door was torn open. In fact it was almost torn from the hinges and flung on the ground.

"Now outside," cried Dick Little. "Just let some one else try a shot. I am itching for one more shot to be fired."

"Oh, sir, please I didn't hev nuthin' at all to do with it," groaned an old man as he was pulled from the stage to the ground.

"Who did it? Who fired the shot?"

"He."

"Who?"

"That man."

"It's a lie. The old rascal did it himself."

At this the old man, pointing to a cowering wretch in a corner of the stage whose pale face was revealed by a dark lantern flashed on it, said:

"If ye'll go to the trouble to sarch that feller ye'll find a pistol in his pocket and one chamber still hot."

With a yell the fellow made an effort to throw the pistol from the coach, but Jim Cummins caught the tell-tale witness in his hand, and said:

"Naw, you won't, my fine fellow! I've got you."

The rascal was seized and dragged roughly to the ground.

"Hold a moment!" cried Jesse James. "I know this man."

"Oh, don't kill me!"

"You are Sam Franey, are you not?"

"Yes."

"You are the uncle of Blanche Travers?"

After a few moments he stammered:

"Yes."

"You have been trying to make your niece a captive."

"I am her guardian."

"I will keep you. I am not done with you yet by a good deal," said Jesse James. "Here, Wood Hite, you will keep close guard over this villain and see he doesn't escape."

"That I will. If he makes any effort in that direction, I will have the supreme pleasure of sending a bullet through his head."

"And don't fail to embrace the opportunity. Come, now, get out of here. Hurry up, or it will be worse for you," cried Jesse James, suddenly assuming a business tone.

"What have you got?"

"Nothing."

"Hand it over to me."

"Here is my purse."

"Now your watch."

"Yes."

"There, stand in a row over there until I get through this man. It's going to rain soon, and we want to get through."

Searching the man carefully, who had declared he had nothing, Jesse found another pocketbook containing several hundred dollars.

"That does pretty well for nothing. Get back in the stage," and he accelerated his movement with a most vigorous kick.

The thunder rolled in the heavens above. The lightning flashed and the rumble of a distant storm was heard.

Jesse and his band made quick business of the work.

They hurriedly robbed all the passengers, and a few moments later were riding away with Mr. Sam Franey in their midst.

The storm burst on them in all its fury, and through mud and rain, thunder and lightning they pressed on up a muddy lane.

"Jesse, what are you going to do with him?" asked Frank, with a significant nod at the prisoner.

"What do you think we ought to do with him?"

"Kill him."

"Well, we'll see about that. How it does rain."

"It seems as if a second flood had come."

"And it is frightfully dark."

"Yes. I was thinking he might give us the slip in this darkness."

"You are right. He might give us the slip. Tell the boys who guard him to keep a fast hold on him, and to under no circumstances let him escape."

The order was given, and the banditti pressed slowly on through mud, darkness and rain.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TOM BRIGGS UNMASKS.

"YER understand me, don't yer?" said Tom Briggs.

"I believe I do," Luke answered.

"Wall, I'm plain ernuff ter be understood. Them fellers air no good, an' ef I war you I'd give 'em ther shake."

"We must go."

"No, not yet. Now ef ye'll jist listen ter me it'll be ther best piece o' work ye ever did."

"I know more of you than you think I do," cried Luke. "You have been playing an excellent part, but I can see through it all."

"Do yer?"

"Yes."

"What hev I been playin'?"

"There is longer any need for you to keep up your peculiar Western dialect. You can speak better if you want to."

"Perhaps I can, Luke Miller," answered the man who had so long been a puzzle to Jesse James.

"You know me, do you?"

"Very well. Come, don't be playing with that revolver, Luke Miller. As I said I am your friend."

"I know you are a detective."

"Correct."

He quietly removed a wig and whiskers, and before them stood a comparatively young man. Tom Briggs had unmasked.

"I am one of Pinkerton's detectives."

"I knew it. You are after me. Very well, I will die before I will surrender."

"Oh, tut—tut to such nonsense!"

"I swear I will."

Luke drew a revolver.

"Put that up," said the detective, coolly. "It might go off and frighten your horse."

"You can make this a light matter if you will, but I shall not. I regret to shed blood, but if driven to it I will kill you."

"What are you going to kill me for?" the detective coolly asked.

"Because you have come to arrest me."

"I have not."

"What! Are you not here to arrest me?"

"No."

"Jesse James, then?"

"No."

"Who?"

"Did I say I had come after any one?"

"No; but Pinkerton's men don't spend a season fishing for nothing."

The detective laughed, and said:

"You are right."

"What is your name?"

"Carl Greene."

"Does your business have anything to do with me?"

"Indirectly."

"What is it then? If it concerns me I have a right to know."

"I come in search of the murderer of your uncle."

Again the blood forsook Luke Miller's face, and he trembled in every limb. He tried to speak, but his tongue failed him, and he was unable to utter a single syllable.

Carl Greene stood for a moment regarding the accused with a smile, which Luke thought almost diabolical.

"I have found the murderer," said the detective.

"It is false, you have not. You have not," screamed Luke.

Twilight stealing over the forest cast deeper shadows over the group, and Luke was certain that he saw dark men in the woods coming upon him.

Still clutching his revolver in his hand he said:

"Carl Greene, I have heard that you were a man noted for shrewdness. I have been informed that you could find that which no other man could discover. But in this you have made a serious mistake. If you say I murdered my uncle you simply lie, that is all."

"Did I say it?"

So wild was Luke with excitement that he quite misunderstood the meaning of Carl Greene. "I will not surrender," he cried, flourishing his revolver. "I will die here before I surrender. Don't think that you are going to make a prisoner of me."

"Oh, put it up—put up that revolver and don't make yourself look ridiculous—"

"You may have a host of men about you, and I know you have power to kill me if you wish, but I would rather die than surrender any time, and I will die before I will surrender."

"You need not do either."

"What do you mean?"

"I did not come here to arrest you. I came to find the murderer of your uncle."

"I swear I did not do it."

"I have not yet accused you."

"What!" cried Luke.

For the first time the real truth began to dawn on him.

He could hardly believe it yet.

Leaping from his horse, he cried:

"Do you say it wasn't me?"

"That is just what I have been trying to say all along, if you would only allow me."

"Do you know who murdered my poor uncle?"

"I do."

"Who?"

"Perhaps under present circumstances I had better not tell."

"Yes, tell me—"

"To tell might wound the feelings of the young lady."

Luke was again mystified. Bidding Blanche remain where she was, he took the detective aside, and said:

"Make yourself plainer."

"You remember the day before your uncle's death that you quarreled?"

"I do."

"About Blanche Travers?"

"We did."

"He swore he would disinherit you if you persisted in marrying her."

"Yes."

"And you swore you would marry her if you had to wade through blood."

"You are right. I made that very foolish speech."

"He vowed he would go to the village the next day and disinherit you."

"So he would had he lived. But, as was shown at the inquest, he was killed that night, and my knife, all stained with blood, was found at his bedside. But I swear, so help me Heaven, I did not do the deed."

"I know you did not; but listen to me. Your uncle had a bitter enemy in Sam Franey, Miss Blanche's uncle. It was his hatred for Franey that caused him to object to your marriage with Blanche."

"Yes."

"I have learned that he had met Franey that day in the woods and they fought. Your uncle knocked him down, and Franey, who has the unforgiving nature of an Indian, determined to kill him."

"He hung around the house and heard your quarrel. You remember after the quarrel was over, you came out upon the rear porch and sat down with your pocket knife in your hand."

"I do, I do, I remember it now. But I didn't open the blade. I sat twirling the knife in my hands and it slipped out and in the dark was lost. In my excitement I forgot to look for it, and it was lost."

"A man was watching you, and another watching him. Sam Franey was watched by a hired man named Bert Smith, whom he had wronged and threatened to throw in prison. Smith saw you go to your room late that night, saw Franey come to the porch, pick up the knife and go to your uncle's room. He heard a struggle, and a moment later Franey came forth, and then when Smith looked in the house your uncle was dead. Killed by Franey with your own knife, and—you know the rest. Smith was a fugitive. He dared not appear and give testimony, for if he did he would be arrested. I came here in the disguise of a man named Briggs, a farmer, a fisherman and wood-cutter, and I met Smith."

"It took a long time for me to get the truth, but I did. Now I have a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Franey. Smith will be pardoned and the chief witness against him."

Luke could hardly believe his ears.

He then told the detective of the discovery made by Jesse, that Blanche was a millionaire, and her uncle had determined to kill her, and of Jesse's pledge to her father.

For a long time the detective was silent and then he said:

"He told the truth, and Jesse James must keep his pledge."

CHAPTER XXIX.

JESSE JAMES REDEEMS HIS PLEDGE.

"Why don't you come and tell me what all this is about?" asked Blanche, growing impatient.

"I will," Luke answered.

He returned to her.

"What have you? Good or bad news?"

"Both," he answered.

"What do you mean?"

"I am free of any crime."

"Ah, Luke."

"Yes—a witness has been found who saw my uncle killed."

"Who did it?"

"I fear to tell you."

"Why?"

"Are your nerves strong enough to bear a shock?"

"Yes."

"A great one?"

"Is the man who did the deed near to me?"

"The nearest relative you have."

"My Uncle Samuel?"

"Yes."

She was silent for several moments, and then said:

"A month ago I would not have believed it."

"Yes, but wonders will transpire in a month."

"Yes."

The detective conducted them to a house in the woods, where was another detective disguised as a woman, who had been passing himself as the wife of Tom Briggs, the champion liar of Missouri. Here was also Mr. Smith the witness.

They remained here until morning, the men spending nearly the entire night in consultation.

"Jesse James must be found," said the detective. "And it will be Luke's work to hunt him."

"But Timberlake's men may capture Luke?"

"He can keep out of their way until he has seen Jesse James."

Next day Luke took Blanche to a friend who agreed to keep her concealed until they had completed all their arrangements. Then Luke set out to find Jesse James.

It was a tedious search.

During the night a heavy rain storm set in.

It lasted nearly all night.

Luke had taken shelter under a shed.

It was nearly daylight, and he sat dozing in his saddle, when he was awakened by a trampling of hoofs in the muddy lane.

"Let us get under this shed and wait until the shower goes by, Jesse."

"All right."

"Come this way."

"Look out and see that he don't escape."

"The James Boys," thought Luke.

As they came under the shed, Luke cried:

"Jesse James, Jesse James."

The cry came nearly being fatal.

There came the oily click, click of a revolver and had he not added:

"Don't shoot, it is Luke Miller," he would have got a bullet through his body.

But he was recognized in time and the revolver was lowered.

"Luke, where have you been?"

"Riding!"

"Where is Blanche?"

"I hope in a place of safety. Who have you there a prisoner?"

"Sam Franey, her uncle, and I guess we had as well hang him here and now and be done with it."

"No—no, don't," interrupted Luke.

"Why?"

"Because there are reasons for wanting to spare him."

Then he took Jesse aside and told him of all the detective had said.

Jesse listened attentively and at the conclusion remarked:

"So the idiosyncratic Briggs, the champion liar of Missouri, was none other than Carl Greene, the famous detective, was he?"

"He was."

"It is remarkable."

"Rather. But, Jesse, what do you design to do?"

"I don't know. I have half a mind to turn this fellow over. Will they hang him?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll do it."

"And more, Jesse."

"What?"

"Remember your pledge."

"To Marion Travers?"

"Yes."

"Haven't I kept it?"

"Nobly, you have. But the work is not yet over. There is more to do."

"What?"

"She must come in possession of the money her father left her."

"Yes."

"Now, Jesse, I want to bring about a meeting between you and Carl Greene."

Jesse James laughed.

"A meeting between Carl Greene and I?"

"Yes."

"Why, don't you know that such a meeting would result in burning powder?"

"No, it would not."

"It would."

"Why?"

"Carl Greene has sworn to arrest me on sight, and I have sworn to shoot him at sight, and consequently when we meet there is liable to be something happen."

"Yet, for the sake of your pledge to your dying friend, could you not just this once meet and transact this business?"

"Yes, if he would not attempt to arrest me."

"He won't."

"It will not do to come any funny business over me."

"I pledge you he won't. I will see him about it."

The arrangements were all made.

Luke and Jesse took the prisoner, and the James Boys band was temporarily disbanded.

Then they went with the prisoner to a friend of Jesse, where they remained concealed until a meeting could be brought about between Carl Greene and the bandit king.

Timberlake and his deputies seemed to suddenly and mysteriously disappear.

There was a decided inactivity for several days on the part of the officers.

Sam Franey meanwhile remained a prisoner at the house of Mr. Paul Otis.

One night Luke came with Carl Greene.

Jesse James was in an adjoining apartment.

Luke rapped on the door.

"Come in."

The door opened and Luke Miller and Jesse James stood face to face.

"Carl Greene."

"Jesse James."

"I have come to redeem a pledge made to a dying friend," the bandit king added.

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION.

"I UNDERSTAND you, Jesse James," said the detective. "And I am glad to know there is something about you still that is good."

"Thank you."

"And now, Jesse, you may talk and act on this occasion with perfect freedom."

"Then we can soon come to terms."

"I want your prisoner."

"Sam Franey?"

"Yes."

"You can have him and welcome. I hope you will be able to hang him."

"His prospects for stretching hemp were never better in all his life."

"Then I am glad of it, for bad as I have always been I am not nearly such a wretch as he is."

"You speak my own thoughts."

When Mr. Sam Franey was informed that he was a prisoner for the murder of Luke's uncle, he almost swooned. For several moments he was unable to speak, but regaining the power, he cried:

"It's all a lie. You can't prove it on me."

"We will see."

"Yes, we will."

"Come in, Smith."

As Bert Smith entered he started to his feet and cried:

"Where did you come from?"

"From the woods where I was hiding, hoping to be able to steal a morsel of food to keep myself from starving, when I saw you break into the house of Luke Miller's uncle and kill the old man."

"Did you see that?"

"Yes."

"All is lost."

He made a confession that very night, and next day was safely landed in the jail. On the trial he was convicted, and just as the judge finished the sentence he fell down upon the floor dead.

His death was caused by heart failure, greatly

aggravated by his guilty conscience. There was not one who witnessed the tragic scene but thought it a just retribution of heaven.

Meanwhile Jesse James had given Luke Miller and Carl Greene all the particulars concerning the fortune which was coming to Miss Blanche Travers. Luke and the detective went down to Old Mexico and brought back with them the vast sum which was turned over to Blanche.

Luke inherited his uncle's estate, but as his uncle had intended to disinherit him had he lived, he followed out his wish and devoted every dollar of it to those distant relatives, just as his uncle would have done had he lived.

We have but little more to add.

Carl Greene, Pinkerton's shrewdest detective, was rewarded by a large share of the fortune which he had helped to save for Blanche. She sent a neat little sum of ten thousand dollars by a trusty friend to Jesse James.

Luke and Blanche were married, and when they in after years read of the wild adventures of the famous bandit king they thought of Jesse James' pledge and the bandit king's last ride to old Mexico for the fortune.

[THE END.]

The Biter Bit.

By ALEXANDER DOUGLAS,

(SCOTLAND YARD DETECTIVE.)

AMONG the habitudes of the different pleasure-resorts at the time of the Restoration are many who remember an enigmatical personage, Count Andrea de Monteleone. The count, as his name indicates, was of Italian origin. He was at that time, about 1830, nearly sixty, but he bore his years vigorously. Always of an irreproachable elegance and perfect address, he allowed himself to be surpassed in foppishness by none of the young dandies of the day. He was not known to possess any property—at least no one had ever seen his chateaux, his estate, or his rent-roll. Nevertheless, he lived in great state. He was to be met with in all the capitals of Europe, was conversant with the different languages, and appeared at home everywhere. In the summer he frequented the mineral springs, the watering-places, and the picturesque regions where the idle congregate from the four corners of the earth. Always and everywhere landlords treated him as an old and valued guest, and always and everywhere he discovered friends or acquaintances among the company. His easy bearing, his habits of life, elegant and cosmopolitan; his high-sounding title, his fortune, which he threw on the green cloth of the gaming table with unexampled recklessness, opened all doors to him. Moreover, he was a brilliant and charming conversationalist or an indefatigable *viveur*, according to the place and the people.

At the epoch at which this story opens, he had led this strange life for at least thirty years. In reality, very little was known of him, but he was received everywhere for the sake of his title and his good company. If, by chance, any one manifested surprise at his wandering existence, protracted beyond the latest years of youth, *they say*—that multiple voice which charges itself with the easy explanation of all mysteries—*they say* responded: "Count Andrea is eccentric." And all was said.

However, from time to time, unpleasant rumors were circulated in regard to the brilliant foreigner. Some were heard to declare, guardedly, that he was a spy. Others hinted, more cautiously still, that he was a blackleg.

"At Spa, several years ago," murmured these timorous persons, "he played with M. de Comeray, and won from him his entire fortune in one night. Comeray was a married man, father of a family—he shot himself the next morning."

"Is that so? Are you sure? But it may have been pure luck. The count is a great gambler, and he wagers extravagant sums," responded the indulgent. It would not do to play with him—that was all.

"In Paris, he won so much money from a Jewish banker, that he forced him to suspend payment. In London, at Lord B.'s, he made a clean sweep of more than one fortune."

"Because there are weak heads that become excited and don't know when to stop. Besides he loses in his turn."

"Rarely."

"He is received everywhere."

"That is because every one is either ignorant

of or has forgotten his adventures. Do you consider poor Comeray's tragic end a very glorious chevron? And, admitting that his ruin was due solely to chance, do you not think that an honest man after such a catastrophe would have renounced cards forever?"

"The passions are so strong. And the count is a born gambler. Besides, now every one has forgotten that affair."

"Because he has changed his name. At that time he called himself Count Raggi. On leaving Spa he altered his cards and inscribed on them 'Count Raggi de Monteleone.' The following year the cards read 'Count R. de Monteleone.' At present he has simply 'Monteleone' engraved beneath a coronet."

Such conversations, fortunately for the count, were rare, for he remained too short a time on any one stage to occupy long the attention of the public.

In the month of August, 1830, when all Europe was absorbed in the revolution at Paris, and politics were the supreme interest of the moment, Monteleone was at Aix-la-Chapelle. There, as everywhere, he was well-known among the gamblers; but in spite of his notorious good fortune, he did not lack antagonists. However, the old players, who had all, at some time or other, left portions of their fortunes in his hands, watched him with unceasing vigilance. Whether it was that this surveillance annoyed Monteleone, or that the political echoes which reached him, aroused in him a desire to visit Paris, still in the commotion caused by her recent barricades, he seemed little disposed to remain at Aix. His winnings at cards, moreover, were very insignificant.

One evening, in the Kursaal, Monteleone mentioned carelessly his approaching departure.

"What!" exclaimed a Frankfort banker, who, during the preceding years, had left more than a million in Monteleone's hands, "are you going to desert us so soon? You generally remain for the season. You shouldn't sulk because the play is light this year. After all, if you don't gain as much as usual, still you are not a loser."

Monteleone paled slightly, but recovered himself almost instantly.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, with a gesture of weariness. "I should like to lose, in order to give a little zest to my life. I have arrived at the age when one pays willingly for emotion. And I am bored; will you play me for a few thousand louis?"

"No. Whatever the price you put on your emotions I do not care to sell them to you," replied the banker, with a smile.

"And why not?"

"I am not rich enough this year. Next year, perhaps, I may risk it," he added, on seeing Monteleone frown.

"Will you allow me to try to win a few hundred louis from you, M. de Monteleone?" exclaimed a young Frenchman, seated at a lansquenet table near the count.

The count raised his head and looked at his interlocutor. He was a young man, about twenty-five years of age, who had arrived only the night before.

"Willingly, sir," he responded; "lose or gain it will be no great matter, either for the one or the other; but we shall make acquaintance, and I hope to prove to these gentlemen that the race of good players is not extinct."

The new arrival threw his gold on the table and passed the cards to his adversary. The count won. "Here are two hundred louis, sir—will you play for them?" he exclaimed, as he collected the stakes.

"Certainly," responded the young Frenchman, drawing some bank notes from his pocket-book.

It was his turn to deal. This time the two hundred louis returned to him.

"Double again, if you like," he said, stacking the gold and notes together.

"Agreed; here are eight thousand francs."

The young man continued to win.

"Double again. Keep it up."

"Sixteen thousand francs. Ah, bah, that isn't worth playing for—a thousand louis?"

"A thousand louis."

And once more Monteleone lost.

He arose, saying:

"To-morrow, sir, we will try it again, if you will. I have not about me the sum I owe you, but I will send it to you by my valet. Whom shall he inquire for at the hotel?"

"M. de Lasours. But we shall meet again, my dear count; you can pay me to-morrow."

"M. de Lasours, I am fortunate in the slight loss that has procured for me the honor of your acquaintance," responded the Count Andrea, bowing profoundly, and so saying he took his

leave, with head erect, eyes brilliant, and a smile on his lips.

Truly, seeing him thus, elegantly attired, irreproachable from head to foot, courteous as a grand seigneur, and cold as a statue—it was difficult to repress a strange feeling of mingled fear and admiration. In a drawing room Count Andrea was so charming a companion that his foppishness and his reputation as a *viveur* were readily condoned. But at play, his marvelous facility in handling the cards, his impassibility in the face of the most violent emotions, his glance, cold and piercing as the blade of a sword, fascinated his adversary and kept him under his domination as under a yoke. To play against him was a luxury indulged in by only *blasse* millionaires, who desired to experience for an instant the excitement of gambling at the price of a breach in their fortunes. But the most practiced eye could never detect the least irregularity in Monteleone's play. But, then, the fear that he inspired was in some sort superstitious. The oldest gamblers grew confused before him.

When they saw the young Frenchman seat himself opposite the terrible count, they sympathized with him from the start.

"Hm," remarked the Frankfort banker in an undertone, as he watched the young man place the bank-notes in his pocketbook, "another man overboard."

"You have just gained twenty thousand francs that will cost you dear," said an English tourist, a man who never touched a card himself, but passed his days observing the gamblers in all the casinos of Europe.

"Really! How so?"

"Because you will give your adversary an opportunity to revenge himself, and Count Monteleone always wins."

"What! always? Do you mean by that to say that he has the reputation of correcting unfortunate chances and governing the hazard?"

"I have observed him during the last ten years. I can distinguish a marked card among a thousand, and am familiar with all the tricks for forcing the cut. When he holds the cards I can see nothing irregular. Nevertheless, he has gained millions here and elsewhere. All the habitudes of the gaming tables know that his presence is the signal for disaster. For my part, I would not play with him."

"Oh, well, I will risk it!" exclaimed Lasours; "and we will see which of us two will ruin the other!"

Up to this point the dialogue had been carried on in a loud voice, and with an accent of determination. The bystanders turned to look at the foolhardy youth, who was about to become an adversary of that old haunter of tripots, the redoubtable Count de Monteleone. But the calm and resolute expression of De Lasours's countenance changed the astonishment into interest.

Standing in the middle of the immense salon, with hands convulsively clasping the back of his chair, he seemed to call upon the assembled company to witness his challenge launched at the man who, for thirty years, had gathered his tithes from all the green tables.

Meanwhile, Monteleone had left the Kursaal, gained his hotel, and mounted to his room.

The apartment he entered was situated at the extremity of the left wing of an immense hotel. For twenty years past the count had occupied this same suite during all his visits to Aix.

For a man of such nomadic tendencies, he had very regular habits. Except for grave reasons, he never changed his hotel. He had his caprices and clung tenaciously to certain pieces of furniture. When the landlord and employees of a hotel had become accustomed to his ways of living, he remained constant to them. At the Cheval d'Or his apartments consisted of a salon, a bed-chamber and a dressing closet. The salon was hung with heavy damask, and all the chinks were carefully closed up by means of curtains and portieres. As this room was situated in a corner of the wing, there were windows on two sides. The bed-chamber opened off one of the other sides, and the fourth was taken up by the dressing-closet and the stair-head, which was closed by double-padded doors and formed a sort of anti-chamber.

Count Monteleone was, therefore, in perfect seclusion when in these rooms, out of the roar of all noise and screened from the indiscretions of his neighbors. His curtain down, his doors closed and covered by their portieres, he could talk, sing or sleep with no fear of being overheard.

The bed-chamber was contiguous to the other rooms, which had formerly formed a part of the suite. But curtains and hangings covered the walls, and the door of communication was care-

fully nailed up, and, furthermore, concealed behind a high wardrobe. The dressing-closet, encircled by the balustrade of the stairs, had no other issue than the door opening into the salon.

He threw off his hat and gloves, sighed heavily, and sat down, appearing for an instant to be overcome by fatigue or reflection. Finally, he arose and looked around the salon, dimly lighted by a single candle. Probably he found this light insufficient, for he turned toward a console, whence he took a lamp, which he lighted with infinite care. Then he adjusted a little apparatus which, by raising or lowering a screen, suddenly illuminated or darkened the room, without extinguishing the lamp. He repeated this operation several times, until he had assured himself that the mechanism was in good order. Then he put out the candle.

A folded gaming-table was standing in the embrasure of a window. He drew it out into the middle of the salon, opened it, and placed on it cards, and the lamp. Undoubtedly the old gambler was expecting the arrival of an opponent, with whom, despite the lateness of the hour, he was about to dispute a few handfuls of gold.

After walking around the table several times, the count approached the mirror. He rearranged his hair, tightened the corsets which braced his figure, bathed his eyes in cold water, adjusted his cuffs, and retied his cravat. In five minutes he had resumed his mask of courtesy and his aristocratic and insolent bearing. The expected adversary might arrive when he would—Count Andrea was under arms.

However, no one knocked at the door; on the contrary, the noises from outside died away little by little into the silence of the night, and the sound of closing doors along the corridors of the hotel was heard. But Monteleone showed no signs of impatience. He returned to the card-table, placed a chair facing his own, sat down, and shuffled the cards. This done, with a marvelous dexterity he laid them down before the empty place.

"Cut, M. de Lascours," he exclaimed, and at the same time he turned the screw of his lamp and plunged the room in darkness. During this interval of obscurity he cut at hazard, then repossessed himself of the cards and turned up the lamp.

Then ensued an engagement with an imaginary *vis-à-vis*, and seizing five or six hands at once he changed them, mingled them, made them disappear, and with an adroitness that the cleverest jugglers might have envied him. While he deftly juggled the marked or slightly beveled cards, or dexterously forced the cut or got rid of a bad hand, he carried on a conversation with his adversary, both asking and answering questions without either confounding either his cards, his ideas or his words; without missing by so much as a second a necessary movement or ever risking a compromising gesture. When the clock struck two he was still seated at the lansquenet table, repeating his performance of lowering and turning up the lamp and talking.

"So, M. de Lascours, you witnessed the three glorious days?" he was saying. "Do you approve of the barricades? Did the king bear himself well? I have heard not. Really? But the Royal Guards fought bravely. Ah! so much the better. What will you bet? The Swiss Guards were at the bottom of the trouble. Here are a thousand loms—make your game. But what the devil—M. de Polignac, also! Nine—it is nine. Will you take the hand? No, not yet; but the next deal, whatever I get. Good—seven and a king. I have been told that the Duc d'Orleans—one, two, three, four, five—it is a seven. Pass again."

At last he arranged the cards, disposed of them up his sleeve, in his pockets—everywhere; extinguished the lamp and went to bed.

The next day, in the Kursaal, M. de Lascours lost the thousand loms he had won, and five hundred more beside. This loss did not depress him, however, any more than the winning of the day before had elated him. This impassibility, equalling that of the count himself, interested the spectators. They neglected all other amusement to follow, with eager gaze, the fluctuations of the game.

The second day of the contest, luck seemed to change suddenly, and M. de Lascours won fifty thousand francs.

The stakes grew heavy, the interest was on the increase. But—strange chance!—the losses and gains balanced each other.

In the midst of tumult caused by the impatient and the curious, M. de Lascours preserved his imperturbable calm. When he sometimes interrupted his play for an instant, it was to talk of the ball of the day before or the concert of the day following. Monteleone, on the contrary—

for the first time in his life, probably—appeared confused. His keen glance grew dull beneath the cold regard of his adversary, and his vivacity deserted him in the presence of such continual self-possession.

At first he had, for an instant, feared that he had met with a confrere. He debated with himself as to whether he had not better retreat. But after having observed De Lascours with an attention cultivated in thirty years of experience, he was satisfied as to his perfect good faith. This certainly, instead of restoring his spirits, only served to disquiet him the more. On the one hand, he saw that the young man was determined to persist until he lost his last louis or had ruined his adversary. On the other hand, he perceived that the society of the moment at Aix was of such character that he could not fleece Lascours without awakening a mistrust which would be disastrous to him. Ten or twelve of his ancient victims had become indefatigable witnesses of the contest. De Lascours's stakes were rising to reckless sums, and the gaze of over six hundred persons were fastened on the table.

What was to be done? Monteleone did not want to lose, and he could not win without risking discovery a hundred times over. He began to play feverishly, and in spite of his mastery over himself, his forehead was bedewed with perspiration. The impassible countenance of the young man intimidated him strangely. Generally it was he who was cool and collected in the face of an excited adversary, and this coolness doubled his address; now he felt confused, troubled, ready to drop the game where the new deal was prepared in advance. For the first time he comprehended the effect he produced on others when he was master of himself.

By dint of looking long at De Lascours, he seemed to recognize him. He persuaded himself that this encounter was not their first, and that at some previous time they had faced each other, cards in hand. But where—when? Monteleone, endowed with an excellent memory, never forgot the names of persons with whom he had had relations, even of the most superficial character. But neither the name nor the face of M. de Lascours occupied a precise place in his memory. It was a vague shadow—a sort of phantom which flitted through his recollections and inspired in him an inexplicable terror.

This uncertainty became before long an insupportable anguish to Monteleone. He began to experience a fear, real and exaggerated, of his adversary; he felt his strength deserting him, his skill at fault, and the earth trembled beneath his feet. He determined, at any cost, to end the struggle on which De Lascours was bent, and leave Aix. He endeavored by every means in his power to bring about circumstances favorable for his withdrawal. But De Lascours would admit of no retreat. He must either gain or lose.

Monteleone shut himself up in his chamber and worked whole nights through. He endeavored to invent a trick so clever that it would be impossible to suspect it or detect the slightest sign of it. So, his blood in a fever, his nerves unstrung by an intense terror, the old gambler shuffled the cards, mixed them, fingered them, practiced his most adroit sleight-of-hand, forced himself to attain to an invisible jugglery, and rendered theft as simple as honesty itself.

With brow bent and trembling hands, he feverishly repeated a cut, the conception of which had been a stroke of genius. Now, he would set to work at the table where his imagination placed M. de Lascours opposite to him; he conversed, he addressed himself, without interrupting his operations, to an invisible company. Again, he would lie back completely exhausted, dropping the cards, his forehead bathed in perspiration.

Suddenly the sonorous striking of a clock roused him from his torpor. He recovered himself, gathered up his cards, rearranged them, lowered the lamp, and recommenced that fantastic struggle with an absent adversary.

"So, knave and king, M. de Lascours!" he exclaimed, throwing the cards right and left: "the knave is my lucky card, you know. It is yours! I have lost! Did you notice the three young ladies who danced last night?" he continued, in an altered voice, simulating an interruption. "Yes, milord, the youngest was the prettiest. Good, M. de Lascours, now for another deal!"

Talking all the while, addressing his remarks now to this one, now to that one, the gambler lowered the lamp from time to time and repeated his trick in the dark.

"Pass me the hand," suddenly said a strange

voice near to Monteleone; a real voice, sonorous and imperious.

The lamp turned up as if by magic, flooded the room with light, and the gambler fell back into his chair with haggard eyes and open mouth. Opposite, the place was no longer empty, but De Lascours in person was gathering up the cards and gazing fixedly at him.

"Sir—what do you want—where did you come from?" he stammered, as soon as he could collect his thoughts and comprehended that the form of his adversary was not a phantom of his diseased mind, but a reality.

"From my rooms, naturally," replied De Lascours, with that inexplicable calm that baffled Monteleone.

The marked cards were there—no denial was possible, nor was any explanation capable of extenuating the *flagrante delicto*. Monteleone felt that all was lost.

"But—how—"

"How did I effect an entrance, you mean?" went on De Lascours. "I have rented the room adjoining yours. I opened the nailed-up door last evening before you entered. I cautiously displaced the wardrobe and entered softly, and for more than an hour I have been watching and listening to you."

Monteleone sprang from his chair, threw himself on De Lascours, and seized him by the throat.

"One of us two shall never leave this room alive!" he hissed between his clenched teeth.

"Come, come, my dear count, are you mad? At least let me speak," said the young man, freeing himself from Monteleone's grasp with a single effort.

"Sir, this is no time for pleasantries—all explanation is superfluous, and—"

"And, my dear count, it is precisely for that reason that we shall come to an understanding together."

"I don't understand—"

"You will understand presently."

Monteleone looked about him for an avenue of escape. Lascours comprehended his intention and laughed.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "my dear count, it is one of two things, is it not? Either I am here as a friend or an enemy. If I came as a friend of what use is it to flee? If, on the contrary, I came as an enemy, you may be sure I did not neglect to have all the issues well guarded."

Monteleone resumed his seat.

"What do you want then?" he demanded, grinding his teeth in rage at his helplessness.

"Lessons, *par bleu!*"

"Lessons?"

"Why, yes. You have won nearly a hundred thousand francs from me since we began to play, have you not? It was all that remained to me of an immense fortune. Alas! play—honest play, you understand, such as I have played up to the present time, the sort of play at which one loses—women, luxury—all that leads to ruin. At my majority I had already disposed of the greater part of my patrimony, for usury had lent its aid to gaming. Since then I have dissipated the remainder. In short, let us waste no more time in talking. I said that you had taken nearly a hundred thousand from me. Keep them as the price of your secrets and let us begin at once."

"I do not exactly understand you, M. de Lascours," responded Monteleone, who was yet uncertain as to what course to pursue.

"Yet it is very clear. I have gone through my inheritance, I tell you. I am ruined. Now, after having led the life I have described to you, you do not expect, I hope, that I should become a lawyer, doctor, or a clergyman. The luxury of the past has left me with a thirst for greater luxury in the future. I want horses, carriages, brilliant mistresses—everything that gold thrown away by handfuls will procure. Come, Count de Monteleone, how do you force the cut?"

For a few moments Monteleone, brought back to the situation and to himself, reflected profoundly. He said to himself that, after all, nothing was more natural or more probable than this explanation. He began to perceive the bright side of this situation. For the present, in lieu of an adversary, he encountered a confederate; for the future, an associate.

"I regret the disagreeable surprise I caused you just now, but you must acknowledge that there were no other means I could have employed that would have decided you. I could not, in decency, make my proposition to you in the Kursaal could I? And then, too, I needed the opportunity of convincing myself in regard to you."

"Come, then, as you desire it," responded Monteleone.

"Add, 'and as I can not do otherwise.'" continued Lascours, with a smile.

"And as I can not do otherwise—take this card, like that—in the right hand good?"

"It appears that I am apt."

"But tell me, you have met me before, then, as you have remarked my good fortune at cards?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Indeed, your face did not seem unfamiliar to me. Yet, surely, I had never heard your name pronounced before you told it me yourself in the Kursaal. And then, your youthful appearance misled me. Where the devil have I seen you?"

"Think well."

"Was it as Badeu? Everybody goes there."

"No."

"At Vichy?"

"I have never been there."

"In London?"

"No."

"In Paris—it must have been in Paris—in one of those charming houses where one is not announced at the door of the salon."

"Not there, either."

"I give it up. Tell me where it was."

"Tax your memory, seek a frame for the picture, a background for the figure. Do you not see an enchanting country?"

"No, by my faith! I see before me a most gracious youth, and nothing more. Hold your hand better and linger your cards more lightly-like that. Pass me the hand—let me show you. See? With the nail of the little finger you detect the beveling."

"A little more practice and I shall succeed better."

"I will lower the lamp presently; we shall see if you can play without looking at your cards."

"Yes," went on de Lascours, as if talking to himself, "it is a pretty country—forests, and meadows, and rolling lands."

"What is that you are saying, De Lascours?"

"Oh, nothing! I was thinking of Spa, where I count on first exercising my little accomplishments."

"At Spa!" exclaimed Monteleone, with a start; "why at Spa?"

"Because I like the place immensely. That is the place where you find the rich Englishmen with the pretty daughters. And then, I love to ride over the wooded hills and through the picturesque valleys. Have you never been at Spa?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, you must allow that the society there is very select. They play heavily there. Let us go there together."

"No, by my faith! I am in haste to quit Aix, to go to Paris."

"Poor business. When Paris is playing at revolutions she does not play at cards."

"I don't wish to play."

"*Sapristi!* what disinterestedness! It is evident that you can afford to rest. But, at Spa, I count on doing great things."

"You must be cautious."

"Oh! I know there are some strong games there. I have witnessed more than one. Turn down the lamp, I think I know the trick now. Very good, thanks—count, were you not at Spa in the month of August, 1812?"

"I—why do you ask?" he stammered.

"For information. That year I witnessed a remarkable catastrophe there."

"You!" exclaimed Monteleone, beside himself this time; "you! but how old are you, then?"

"Twenty-five, come next All Saints' Day, as the country people say. I tell you it was the devil's own game that was indulged in by the *blase* lords and the young fools, who rushed on to their ruin as if urged by some incomprehensible vertigo. Among these gambling fiends there was led astray, I know not how, a young Frenchman of good family and father of two or three children. His name, I believe, was—"

"Leave your tales and attend to what you are doing," interrupted Monteleone, shortly, as he hastened to turn up the lamp; "where were we?"

But suddenly he turned deathly pale and his words died in his throat. By the light of the lamp he caught sight of his companion's face. What he saw there had undoubtedly alarmed him, for he was gazing at him with terror-stricken eyes.

Had he suddenly given a name to this visage, the features of which had continually haunted his memory.

"Comeray!" he exclaimed, in a faint voice; "are you Comeray? But, no! Comeray is dead. Are you his ghost—or am I mad?"

Monteleone checked himself abruptly and clasped his head with both hands, as if to keep it from bursting. Then after an instant's silence, he threw the cards on the table with an oath.

"The devil!" he exclaimed; "these damned cards make my head whirl. What have I been saying, M. de Lascours?"

"I don't exactly know. You asked me if I were a ghost—the specter of M. Comeray, it seems to me."

"Let us go on with the play," cried Monteleone, furiously; "for several days, or several nights, if you prefer it. I have overtaxed myself, and my brain is growing weak, I believe. Let us repeat the cut one last time and then go to bed."

"Was it not precisely by the *new deals* prepared in advance that Comeray was ruined?" continued Lascours; "it was impossible to prove that his adversary understood how to rule the

hazard, but it was suspected. Show me how to arrange the new deal skilfully. I am curious to see the trick that ruins a man and kills him at the same time."

Monteleone made no response. The gaze of De Lascours held him spell-bound, and he was powerless to control either his anger or his terror. His self-possession left him. He felt that he had become the sport of a fatality against which there was no defense.

"Come," cried De Lascours, energetically, to rouse the gambler from his torpor; "come! show me the card that served to wad Comeray's pistol?"

"Who are you, and what do you want?" stammered Monteleone, his eyes haggard, his teeth chattering with terror; "what is your object in speaking to me? And yet at this moment I seem to see him there in your place. But what were you in 1812? A child of scarcely six years."

"And yourself, Monteleone—what were you then? A young and handsome adventurer, filling cards, to the detriment of good players in good faith, and paying for your orgies with the patrimony of widows and orphans."

"M. de Lascours—"

"Let us have done with *soubriquets* and pseudonyms, Master Raggi," cried the young man, throwing the marked cards full in the other's face; "my task is accomplished. I will commit myself with you no further."

"What does this mean? Sir—I have pistols there?"

"It means that I have avenged my father and unmasked a swindler. Enter, gentlemen," he called out, turning toward the door.

In response to his call, five or six of the chief players of the Kursaal came out of the bed-chamber.

A magistrate and two policemen accompanied them. Monteleone was seized by the collar as he was presenting his pistol-case to young Comeray.

"Pardon!" exclaimed the Frankfort banker, whom he had formerly robbed of millions; "pardon—pistols may be tampered with also; a duel is a game of chance like another, you see."

"Remove this man," commanded the magistrate. "M. de Comeray, I thank you for having volunteered to play this part, enabling us to take this thief *in flagrante delicto*."

"It was a personal vengeance against the man who made an orphan of me at six years of age. You owe me no thanks. But I have had a hard night. Good-evening, gentlemen."

He passed out. The witnesses of the scene dispersed. Monteleone, sent back to France, was tried and convicted. He killed himself in his prison.

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